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The Cons of Consensus Democracy in Homogeneous Societies

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Simon Bulmer, Charlie Jeffery and William Paterson, *Germany's European Diplomacy. Shaping the Regional Milieu*

Ivo Stork

214

Richard Luther and Kris Deschouwer (eds.), *Party Elites in Divided Societies. Political Parties in Consociational Democracy*

Stefaan Friers

217

Thomas C. Lawton, James N. Rosenau and Amy C. Verdun (eds.), *Strange Power: Shaping the Parameters of International Relations and International Political Economy*

Randall D. Germain

220

Contributors

223

In memory of Bert Pijenburg

224

Lijphart versus Lijphart: The Cons of Consensus Democracy in Homogeneous Societies¹

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The model democracy of the new Europe is characterized by cultural homogeneity and by consociational patterns of government (Lijphart 1968: 37)

Abstract

In 1968, Lijphart foresaw a development towards elite cooperation in culturally homogeneous societies and warned that the lack of opposition within such democracies would lead to anti-system opposition. In 1999, however, Lijphart advocated consensus democracy regardless of the degree of social segmentation. This paper finds more support for the earlier warning than for the recent recommendation. It argues that any democracy is an ambiguous mixture of inclusiveness (requiring elite cooperation) and accountability (requiring elite competition) and suggests that the relative emphasis on one of these characteristics should be contingent on whether the primary distinction is between social segments, or between elite and mass. Writing in 1968, Lijphart expected anti-system opposition in depoliticized democracies to come from the neo-democratic left. Although this paper now finds such opposition to come primarily from the populist radical right, it does confirm Lijphart's earlier warning against a lack of competition in homogeneous societies.

1 Depoliticized democracy: dangerous or desirable?

Lijphart's 1968 article in *Comparative Political Studies* is well known for being the first publication of his typology of democratic systems. It amended democratic theory, as it existed at the time, by adding to the dimension of mass political culture (homogeneous/fragmented) a dimension of elite behaviour (competitive/coalescent). This allowed him to identify his famous 'consociational democracy', in which the destabilizing forces of a deeply divided political culture are offset by cooperation at the elite level, next to (Anglo-American) centripetal democracy and (Continental European) centrifugal democracy.

Figure 1 Lijphart's typology of democratic regimes

		Mass Political Culture	
		Homogeneous	Segmented
Elite Behaviour	Cooperation	<i>Depoliticized Democracy</i>	<i>Consociational Democracy</i>
	Competition	<i>Centripetal Democracy</i>	<i>Centrifugal Democracy</i>

What has drawn less attention is the fact that the logic of his own two-by-two table alerted Lijphart to the existence, at least in theory, of a fourth type in which conflicts are absent both at the mass and at the elite level. Because of the absence of political conflict, Lijphart labelled this a 'depoliticized democracy' and argued that it would become the dominant pattern in Europe as, at the time of his writing, social cleavages were already subject to erosion. Although this was reducing the need for elite cooperation to safeguard democratic stability, Lijphart actually observed a trend towards more elite cooperation.

Now, a third of a century later, we can add Lijphart's forecast to the rather exclusive collection of successful predictions in political science. No new cleavages have divided hitherto homogeneous political cultures, while the European countries that used to be deeply divided have witnessed a substantial lessening of tensions. This latter development has even led to a reinterpretation of consociational democracy as a temporary arrangement, as a phase in the process of social integration (e.g., Lehmbruch 1993: 56-57; Linder 1998: 171-73). At first, there were signs that the elites reacted to the erosion of the social cleavages by adopting a more adversarial style (e.g., single-party governments in Austria, ideological polarization in the Netherlands), but soon elite cooperation appeared to survive the development of more homogeneous political cultures.

Lijphart himself does not claim success for his prediction. Using primarily institutional indicators Lijphart did reassess his earlier assertion that elite cooperation in the Netherlands ended around 1967 (e.g., in Lijphart 1975: vi), but still observed a slight decline in the degree of Dutch consensus democracy caused by a shift from surplus-majority to minimum winning coalitions (Lijphart 1989). Others, however, not limiting themselves to institutional factors, have determined an intensification of consensus seeking in the Netherlands, especially since the 'purple coalition' of social democrats and two brands of liberals took office in 1994. As Koole and Daalder put it:

The present consensual atmosphere differs from that in the days of pillarisation in that it is rather due to converging visions on many political issues than the result of

negotiations among political elites despite their initial differences in principle. To exaggerate: 'compromises then, consensus now' (Koole & Daalder, forthcoming).

The use of institutional indicators is probably also the reason why Lijphart finds only a 'tiny' average shift towards consensus democracy in his sample of thirty-six countries, although he does agree with Mair (1994) that, even in institutional terms, there has been a shift towards consensus in Northwestern Europe (Lijphart 1999: 256). If we look at behaviour rather than institutions, the trend towards consensus politics seems to be more pronounced and more widespread. Katz and Mair argue that developments such as an almost general decline of party membership and an increasing reliance of political parties on state resources makes politics more elitist, while at the same time politics is becoming less conflictual as party programmes are converging (Katz & Mair 1995). They see these trends as leading to 'the emergence of the cartel party', a term that evokes strong associations with the term Lijphart uses in his Dutch-language publications for 'depoliticized democracy': 'cartel democracy'.

In that same 1968 article in which Lijphart predicted this development, he was less than enthusiastic about it. Although the lack of conflict at the mass level and the lack of competition at the elite level should produce the greatest stability imaginable, it seemed to Lijphart to be also most vulnerable. Citing Lowi, Lijphart worried about its oligopolistic nature, atrophying the institutions of popular control, and quoting Dahl, he worried that "this new Leviathan is too remote and bureaucratized, too addicted to bargaining and compromise, too much an instrument of political elites and technicians" (Lijphart 1968: 38). He advocated introducing some form of opposition into depoliticized democracy, clearly fearing that without some meaningful voters' choice within the system, they may choose against the system.

However, in 1999, Lijphart takes up a radically different position:

The consensus option is the more attractive option for countries designing their first democratic constitutions or contemplating democratic reform. This recommendation is particularly pertinent, and even urgent, for societies that have deep cultural and ethnic cleavages, *but it is also relevant for more homogeneous countries* (Lijphart 1999: 302, emphasis added).

This contrast between 'the younger Lijphart' and 'the older Lijphart' cannot be explained away by pointing out that, in 1968, Lijphart was warning against 'depoliticized democracy', being one of the four cells in his two-by-two typology, whereas, in 1999, Lijphart's recommendation concerns 'consensus democracy', being one of two basic types of democracy in a new typology. First of all, 'depoliticized democracy' is identical to 'consociational democracy', but without a divided political culture. This means that it has all the elite-level characteristics of 'consociational democracy' (grand coalition, proportionality, segmental autonomy and minority veto), and these clearly overlap with four

of the ten characteristics of 'consensus democracy' (oversized governments, proportional representation, (non-)territorial federalism and an entrenched constitution). The most important difference between 'depoliticized democracy' and 'consensus democracy' is that the characteristics of the former refer to elite behaviour, whereas I already noted above that the characteristics of the latter are of a more institutional nature (cf. Lijphart 1989; Andeweg 2000: 513). However, Lijphart argues that the institutional characteristics of consensus democracy produce better, 'kinder and gentler', policies (more on that later), and that the institutions cannot have these effects if they do not affect the behaviour of the elites formulating government policy. In other words, for our purposes the differences between 'depoliticized democracy' and 'consensus democracy' do not matter all that much, and the contrast between Lijphart's earlier warning and his more recent recommendation is real.

The purpose of this article, meanwhile, is not to critically examine inconsistencies or changes in Lijphart's thinking over time. After all, one can hardly blame a scholar for continuing to develop his ideas over a period of more than 30 years. The contrast between the warning and the recommendation should merely serve to alert us to the important question whether consensus government in a society lacking deep social cleavages is desirable or dangerous.

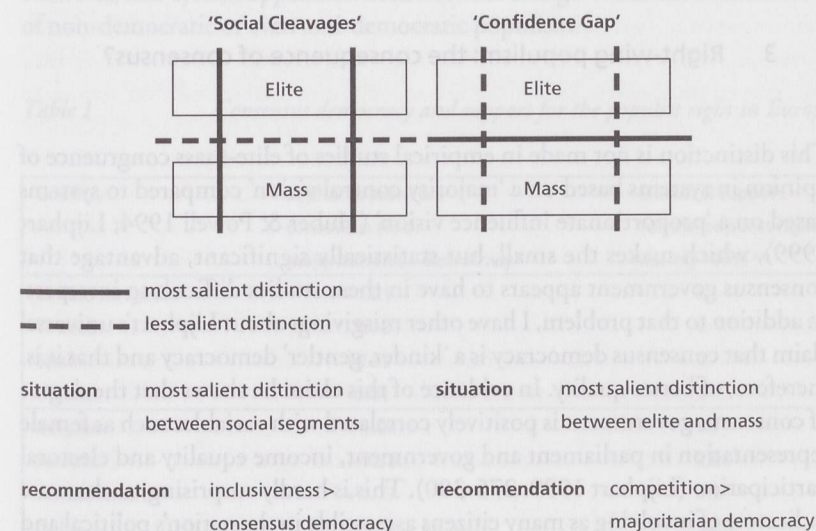
2 Inclusiveness or accountability: a contingent choice

A first attempt at answering this question starts with democratic theory. Lijphart (e.g., 1985:110) has defended the democratic quality of consociational democracy with reference to the relatively high ranking Dahl accorded existing consociational democracies with regard to their degree of democracy, defined as polyarchy (cf. Dahl 1971: 231-48). This defense has surprised some critics of consociationalism's democratic credentials: the defining characteristic of consociationalism is consensus seeking; that of polyarchy is competition (e.g., Van Schendelen 1984:39-40; Lustick 1997: 105). This little debate is crucial, because Dahl's polyarchy actually has two dimensions: competition and *inclusiveness*. It is obvious that both consociational/depoliticized democracy (which aims to prevent the permanent exclusion from power of any social segment) and consensus democracy (which is characterized by institutions that broaden the involvement in decision making as widely as possible) score very high on inclusiveness, which is operationalized as the proportion of the population entitled to participate in public contestation. The fact that consociational democracies also scored high on competition is counterintuitive. It is most likely an artefact, caused by Dahl's operationalization of competition as electoral competition (free and fair

elections, etc.): consociationalism's elite cooperation did not usually extend into the electoral arena, although the competition there was intended to mobilize the faithful rather than to win over new converts. Given their very nature it seems reasonable to assume that consociational/depoliticized democracy and consensus democracy are outperformed with regard to competition if we use a less restrictive definition of competition.

The debate on consociationalism's democratic quality thus hinges on the relative importance that should be attached to inclusiveness and competition. A universal answer to that question may well be out of our reach, but I submit that a conditional answer is possible. Democratic government is supposed to provide a link between the citizens and public policy and how best to design that link is contingent on the composition of the citizenry and on its relations with those who formulate public policy, the political elite.

Figure 2 Two combinations of social composition and elite/mass relations



Where the most salient distinction is not between elite and mass, but consists of one or more social cleavages between social segments (in particular if these segments are of a more or less permanent, ascriptive, nature), an emphasis on inclusiveness enhances congruence of public policy with citizens' views, and reduces the risk that, eventually, excluded minorities will resort to undemocratic means to protect their interests. At the same time, the absence of a salient distinction (or confidence gap) between elite and mass indicates a commonality of interests and ideas among each social segment's citizens and

leaders, thus reducing the risk of agency loss and the consequent need for accountability. Conversely, where the most salient distinction is not between such permanent social segments, but rather between the political elite and the mass, there is a risk of agency loss, and congruence of public policy with citizens' views is fostered by keeping the elites accountable to the mass. Principal-agent theory tells us that such accountability is best served by competition, as the opposition has a vested interest in monitoring the rulers and informing the voters, thus reducing agency loss (e.g., Lupia and McCubbins 1998). At the same time, the absence of a salient distinction (or cleavage) at the mass level makes it unlikely that inclusiveness greatly improves the congruence of public policy with citizens' views. It follows that the quality of democracy is best served by consociational or consensus government in deeply divided societies, but that the 'younger Lijphart's' caution against such elite cooperation in more homogeneous societies is pertinent.

3 Right-wing populism: the consequence of consensus?

This distinction is not made in empirical studies of elite-mass congruence of opinion in systems based on a 'majority control vision' compared to systems based on a 'proportionate influence vision' (Huber & Powell 1994; Lijphart 1999), which makes the small, but statistically significant, advantage that consensus government appears to have in these studies difficult to interpret. In addition to that problem, I have other misgivings about Lijphart's universal claim that consensus democracy is a 'kinder, gentler' democracy and that it is, therefore, of better quality. In evidence of this claim he shows that the degree of consensus government is positively correlated with variables such as female representation in parliament and government, income equality and electoral participation (Lijphart 1999: 275-300). This is hardly surprising, as these are indicators of involving as many citizens as possible in the nation's political and economic life: of inclusiveness. One might even argue that congruence of opinions between elites and mass itself is an indicator of inclusiveness only. However, in the same chapter, consensus democracy is also asserted to be superior to majoritarian democracy with regard to accountability: even in majoritarian systems, Lijphart argues, voting for the opposition does not always 'throw the rascals out', for example when the opposition is internally divided. By contrast "it is actually easier to change governments in consensus democracies than in majoritarian democracies, as shown by the shorter duration of cabinets in consensus systems" (Lijphart 1999: 289). Apart from the fact, acknowledged by Lijphart, that a complete change in the party

composition of governments in consensus democracies is exceptional, the occurrence of partial changes in government composition does not mean that this composition is also 'easier to change' by the voters. Not only in the Netherlands is the link between changes in the election outcome and changes in government often tenuous. And, apart from the weak effectiveness of voters holding the government accountable, it must often be unclear to the voters with which party in the (oversized) coalition they should identify the unpopular policies (cf. Narud 1996).

It would seem that Lijphart's evidence primarily confirms the hypothesis that consensus government is strong on inclusiveness and weak on accountability. If that is so, Lijphart's own original misgivings about consensus government in homogeneous societies would lead us to expect the absence of competition among the cartel parties to result in stronger anti-system opposition in those countries. Writing in the late 1960s, Lijphart expected this anti-system opposition to come from neo-democrats, seeking radical democratic reform. However, anti-system opposition need not be so benign: it can also take the form of non-democratic or even anti-democratic populism.

Table 1 *Consensus democracy and support for the populist right in Europe*

Country	Lijphart's score on consensus (+) or majoritarian (-) democracy*	Electoral support for the populist right during 1990s**
United Kingdom	- 1.21	0
Greece	- 0.73	0
Spain	- 0.59	0
Ireland	0.01	0
Belgium	+ 1.08	9.7
Austria	+ 0.33	22.0
Switzerland	+ 1.77	7.6
Italy	+ 1.07	20.9
Denmark	+ 1.25	7.5
Norway	+ 0.63	10.8
France	- 1.0	14.2
The Netherlands	+ 1.23	1.8

* Executives-Parties dimension 1945-96 (Lijphart 1999, p.312)

** Data (except on Greece and Spain) are averaged outcomes in national parliamentary elections provided by Peter Mair; parties included: UK (National Front), Greece (EPEN), Spain (Falange, MCE), Belgium (VB, FN), Austria (FPÖ), Switzerland (SVP, Freedom Party, Lega), Italy (MSI/AN, Lega Nord & Fiamma), Denmark (Progress, Danish People's Party), Norway (Progress), France (FN), The Netherlands (CP/CD).

During the 1990s, extreme right-wing populism has clearly been a more significant electoral phenomenon in consensus democracies than in majoritarian democracies. Popular support for the radical right is even more pronounced in the classical examples of consociational democracy: in the most recent elections (1999) in Belgium, the Vlaams Blok and Front National combined took 12.5 per cent of the vote nationwide; in Switzerland, Blocher's SVP won 22.5 per cent; and last but not least, in Austria, Haider's FPÖ obtained 26.9 per cent of the vote.

Admittedly, it is unlikely that every single vote for these parties is cast in protest against the cosy cartels that have continued to monopolize politics in these countries long after the social segmentation for which they provided a solution had disappeared. Interpreting the motives of voters of the populist right is exceedingly difficult, not in the least because of the social stigma attached to supporting these parties. The two rival hypotheses that are considered most seriously in the literature are that a vote for the populist right expresses specific concern over immigration and its consequences, or that such a vote expresses a generalized disenchantment with the established political parties (see, e.g., Ignazi 1992; Van der Burg et al. 2000). It is most likely that the pattern of motives differs from country to country, and that country-specific motives can also play a role (such as the EU in Switzerland, or Flemish nationalism in Belgium). Nevertheless, generalized protest plays a role in all three cases, and some voters mention both anti-immigration and anti-cartel feelings. In Austria, for example, exit polls indicate that, in 1999, 65 per cent of FPÖ-voters mentioned scandals and irregularities and 63 per cent thought it was simply 'time for a change', while 47 per cent voted 'against immigrants' (cited in Rose 2000: 32). Given the contribution of anti-cartel protest to the FPÖ-vote, it is perhaps no coincidence that the EU, itself sometimes described as a consociational system (or, less kindly, as a 'conspiracy of elites'), reacted so strongly and rashly against the FPÖ entering the Austrian government, and that this ill-considered reaction was led by the government of Belgium.

4 The Netherlands: an exception that proves the rule²

Table 1 also shows exceptions to the pattern of a strong populist right in consensus democracies and a weak populist right in majoritarian democracies: France is a rather majoritarian system, but support for the Front National is above the European average; the Netherlands is a consensus democracy as well as a classic case of a consociational democracy turned depoliticized democracy, but the populist right rarely attracts sufficient voters to win a seat in parliament. (Note that Table 1 is not exhaustive: Finland, for example, is also

quite high on the consensus scale while lacking a strong populist right.) In the context of this article, the Dutch exception is of particular interest. One might argue that, in the Netherlands, generalized protest is channelled less towards the extreme right and more to the extreme left. While it is true that the Socialist Party (SP) sometimes presents itself as the '*tegen-party*' (the 'against-party'), adding its average support in the 1990s (1.7 per cent) to that of the populist right (CD) does not affect the Netherlands' exceptional position in Table 1.

One potential explanation is that (so far) the Netherlands seems to have escaped 'Lord Acton's curse' (Rose 2000: 30) of corruption and clientelism caused by too much power for too long. Lehmbruch regarded proportional patronage as so characteristic of consociational democracy that he called it *Proporzdemokratie* (Lehmbruch 1967) and Della Porta and Mény (1997: 171-173) mention *consociativismo* as one of the factors explaining the variation in the incidence of corruption. Although it seems plausible that government by cartel increases the probability of corruption and clientelism, and that these in turn provide ammunition for anti-system opposition, there are two problems with this explanation. First, it only rephrases the question 'why no strong populist right in the Netherlands?' to become 'why no widespread corruption and clientelism in the Netherlands?' Parts of the answer may be that the predominant Calvinist culture acted as a prophylactic, or that the absence of territorial representation has reduced the risk of pork-barrel politics or constituency service degenerating into corruption and clientelism (Andeweg 1999: 120; Luther & Deschouwer 1999: 261-262), but so far these are just hypotheses. Another problem is that there actually appears to be a negative, although statistically insignificant, correlation between the degree of consensus democracy and (perceived) corruption (Lijphart 1999: 289). This is rather counterintuitive, and perhaps there are alternative explanations (such as the way corruption was measured, or the need to isolate depoliticized from consensus democracies, etc.), but for the time being, the low incidence of corruption provides no convincing explanation for the Dutch exception with regard to support for the populist right.

Another explanation could be that in the Netherlands, the cartel has been less closed, and less dominant, than elsewhere (e.g., Wolinetz 1999: 239-240). The very low electoral threshold has made it easy for challengers to win representation, and this has in turn forced the established parties to adjust their policies to take the wind out of the new parties' sails. Originally, most newcomers challenged the comfortable positions of the big parties in their own social segments (e.g., SGP, GPV and RPF for the Protestants; KNP and RKPN for the Catholics; PSP and CPN for the secular working class), but more recently new parties, and D66 in particular, have challenged the cartel as such. At the governmental level, there has been relatively more change in the partisan composition than in other consociational/depoliticized democracies (Luther

& Deschouwer 1999: 255) and new challengers such as DS70, PPR and D66 entered governing coalitions within a few years of their foundation. If this explanation is correct, the Dutch exception actually reinforces the main thrust of this article: that democracy is an ambiguous mixture of inclusiveness (requiring cooperation) and accountability (requiring competition), with the desirability of the emphasis on either one being contingent on social conditions, and that in a relatively homogeneous society at least a modicum of competition is needed to keep the elites accountable and the democracy in good health.

Notes

1. This article is based on my contribution to two debates with Arend Lijphart on May 30, 2000 at Leiden University and on February 7, 2001 at Leiden University's campus in The Hague. I should like to thank Arend Lijphart and others who intervened in the discussion for helping me to develop my ideas.

2. For readers who are unfamiliar with the Dutch party system, the small parties mentioned in this paragraph are: CD (Centre Democrats (formerly Centre Party), populist right, represented in parliament 1982-1986, 1989-1998); SGP (Political Reformed Party, fundamentalist Protestant, in Parliament throughout the postwar period); GPV (Reformed Political League, fundamentalist Protestant, in parliament since 1952, now merged into Christian Union); RPF (Reformed Political Federation, fundamentalist Protestant, in Parliament since 1981, now merged into Christian Union); KNP (Catholic National Party, fundamentalist Roman Catholic, in Parliament from 1948 to 1956); RKPN (Roman Catholic Party of the Netherlands, fundamentalist Roman Catholic, in parliament from 1972 to 1977); CPN (Communist Party of the Netherlands, in parliament from 1918 to 1986, now merged into Green Left); PSP (Pacifist Socialist Party, in parliament from 1959 to 1989, now merged into Green Left); DS70 (Democratic Socialists '70, centrist split-off from Labour party, in parliament from 1971 to 1981); PPR (Political Party of the Radicals, leftist split-off from the main Christian-Democratic parties, in parliament from 1971 to 1989, now merged into Green Left); D66 (Democrats 66, reformist progressive liberal party, in parliament since 1967).

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The Pros and Cons - But Mainly Pros - of Consensus Democracy¹

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Abstract

Over a period of about forty years, my thinking has evolved from undiluted admiration for British-style majoritarianism to an overall preference for the contrasting consensus (and consociational) models of democracy. I agree that consensus democracy has some drawbacks, but these are outweighed by its many and strong advantages. Majoritarian democracy may offer greater accountability, but this advantage does not translate into close government-voter proximity, and in practice often fails to enable voters to dismiss governments of which they disapprove. Right-wing populism in consensus democracies is probably less attributable to the lack of competition among the major parties than to the opportunity that proportional representation offers small parties to get elected, and its dangers should not be exaggerated. Finally, parties in Western democracies continue to be significantly divided on many crucial policy issues, contrary to my 1968 prediction.

1 Three successive theoretical postures

Rudy Andeweg is quite right in describing the shift in my evaluation of the respective merits of majoritarian democracy on the one hand and consensus and consociational democracy on the other. I can even add a third phase, an 'even younger Lijphart', to the two he distinguishes, 'younger' and 'older' Lijphart. In my undergraduate and graduate student days in the late 1950s and early 1960s, I regarded the Westminster model as the best form of democracy in every respect and multiparty democracy (with proportional representation, coalition cabinets, etc.) as clearly inferior.

This admiration for the Westminster model represents a long and strong tradition in American political science: A. Lawrence Lowell and Woodrow Wilson – who served as fifth and sixth presidents of the American Political Science Association in the first decade of the 20th century – saw the British two-party parliamentary system as the democratic ideal (see, e.g., Wilson 1884; Lowell 1896). I was also directly influenced by my Yale graduate school mentors Gabriel A. Almond and Robert T. McKenzie: Almond had recently