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Lijphart, A.

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## The Pros and Cons - But Mainly Pros - of Consensus Democracy<sup>1</sup>

Arend Lijphart

University of California, San Diego

### 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



written his famous article *Comparative Political Systems* (1956), in which he compared the Continental European systems unfavorably with the Anglo-American systems, and McKenzie, the author of the magisterial *British Political Parties* (1955), was also a fervent admirer of the British form of government in general and its two-party competition in particular.

In the second – ‘younger Lijphart’ – phase (from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s, including the period of my professorship at the University of Leiden from 1968 to 1978), I became more ambivalent in my appraisal of the two alternative democratic models. I discovered the advantages of consociational democracy for the Netherlands and other divided countries, and I recommended the consociational model to plural societies that were not or not yet democratic, such as South Africa. However, I was also rather apologetic about this recommendation: I argued that deeply divided societies could not afford the luxury of majoritarian government and that consociationalism was therefore the best, indeed the only, solution for them, in spite of clear disadvantages in terms of democratic quality and effective decision-making, although I also argued that these disadvantages should not be exaggerated (Lijphart 1977: 47-52). My advice, therefore, clearly pertained only to divided societies. For more homogeneous countries as well as for countries that were becoming less and less divided, such as the Netherlands from the 1960s on, I believed majoritarian democracy to be the more desirable model.

In the third – ‘older Lijphart’ – phase from the mid-1980s on, I became more and more convinced that the consociational/consensus model was actually superior to the majoritarian model in most respects – a conclusion that I foreshadowed in my Stein Rokkan Lecture at the ECPR Joint Sessions in Leiden in 1993 (Lijphart 1994) and that I present explicitly and at length in *Patterns of Democracy* (Lijphart 1999).

In the second phase, as Andeweg correctly points out, I also emphasized the dangers of depoliticized or cartel democracy, that is, consociational democracy in a country that is not, or is no longer, a divided society and that therefore does not need a consociational government. I saw Dutch society and government in the late 1960s and 1970s as moving in the direction of such a cartel democracy. My worry was that my own preference for the majoritarian qualities of a strong opposition, clearer choices, greater openness and less elitism was in fact shared by most citizens, and that their dislike of the contrasting consociational features of too much compromise, too much secrecy, and so on, could easily lead to an aversion not just to consociational democracy but to democracy in general and to anti-democratic attitudes and movements.

This aversion could obviously also lead to laudable attempts to make the system more democratic – I saw the new Dutch party Democrats '66 as a case in point – but I saw a potential danger here, too: the possibility that, if such

efforts were not successful, the frustrated democrats could become anti-democrats. This unhappy scenario was inspired by the example of the German sociologist Robert Michels who started out as a convinced and idealistic democrat in the early years of the 20th century, but who came to the conclusion that because of the ‘iron law of oligarchy’, democracy was an unattainable ideal (Michels 1925). He further reasoned that the next best option was a non-democratic government under a charismatic leader, such as Mussolini. He eventually became a fascist and accepted an academic appointment in Italy in the 1930s.

## 2 Consociational versus consensus democracy

There appears to be a clear discrepancy between these arguments and my ‘older Lijphart’ argument, as well as the empirical results buttressing it, that consensus democracy is the preferable form of democracy for all countries, including those that are largely homogeneous. For the most part, I agree that this is a real discrepancy that represents a fundamental change in my thinking. The one qualification that I should like to add, however, is that consociational and consensus democracy are closely related but not synonymous. The concept of consensus democracy originally emerged from my attempt to define and measure consociational democracy more precisely, but which resulted in an operational definition that differed to such an extent from consociational democracy that I decided to attach the new label of ‘consensus democracy’ to it.

One major difference is in their respective points of departure. I defined consociational democracy in terms of those key explanatory elements – grand coalition, cultural autonomy, proportionality, and minority veto – that I discovered in my empirical analyses of divided countries with stable democracies like the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland and Lebanon. In order to define consensus democracy, I started out with the logical characteristics of majoritarian democracy – which institutional features maximize the concentration of power in the hands of the majority? – and I defined consensus democracy in terms of the opposite characteristics. This led to different, although, as I stated before, closely related, sets of defining features: four such features for consociational democracy and eight defining elements (Lijphart 1984), later expanded to ten (Lijphart 1999), for consensus democracy. A consociational democracy is generally also a consensus democracy, but a consensus democracy is not necessarily a consociational democracy.

Another way of expressing this difference would be to say that a consociational democracy is an intensive form of consensus democracy. For



instance, if the grand coalition of consociational democracy takes the form of a coalition of all of the larger parties, it is an even broader and more inclusive coalition than the oversized or surplus coalition (a coalition larger than a minimal winning or minimal majority cabinet) that is typical of consensus democracy. Contrasting examples here are the Austrian grand coalitions from 1945 to 1966 and the Swiss 'magic formula' coalitions since 1959 on the one hand and the frequent Dutch oversized, but not grand, coalitions in the 1946-67 period. I agree with Andeweg that it is desirable to have a real opposition in parliament, that is, at least one major party that is not included in the cabinet, except in the case of a deeply divided society. But even this one exception needs to be qualified: consociational democracies can have grand coalitions that are defined not in terms of political parties but in terms of the participation of representatives of all major ethnic and/or religious groups in the cabinet, as in Belgium and India. In such cases, it is therefore possible to have the best of both worlds: both a grand ethnic/religious coalition and a strong parliamentary opposition.

An additional point worth making in this connection is that the oversized cabinets of consensus democracies have the advantage of almost always being composed of parties that together were supported by clear majorities of the voters, whereas one-party 'majority' cabinets in majoritarian systems are very frequently based on mere pluralities instead of actual majorities of the total votes cast in elections. For instance, in all British elections since 1945, the party winning the election and forming the one-party cabinet has never won 50 per cent or more of the vote. For this reason, Jack H. Nagel (2000) has argued that it would be more accurate to call majoritarian democracy 'pluralitarian' democracy. Moreover, this advantage of oversized cabinets is usually shared by coalition cabinets that are minimal winning instead of oversized. Such cabinets typically occur in democracies with proportional representation (PR) elections and multiparty systems where it is mathematically very difficult to build a parliamentary majority coalition that does not also represent a majority of the voters.

### 3 Consensus and consociational versus majoritarian democracy

With the exception of the above distinction between consensus and consociational democracy, I do think that both types are generally to be preferred to majoritarian democracy. One reason for this preference is that majoritarian democracy does not really have the desirable democratic qualities that are often attributed to it. For instance, when we compare British majoritarian democracy with Dutch consociational democracy (1917-67) and

consensus democracy (since 1967), British voters do not seem to have had more or clearer choices than Dutch voters; in fact, the advantage that two-party competition is usually said to have is that it forces both parties to take centrist positions that are not far apart and that therefore do not offer clearly divergent alternatives to the voters. The Official Secrets Act sets strict limits to the openness of British democracy. Furthermore, I do not see major differences in the elitism of the two systems; for instance, Dutch party leaders can guarantee their re-election by claiming the top positions on their party lists, but so can British party leaders by reserving safe constituencies for themselves. In general, the difference between majoritarian and consociational/consensus systems is in the adversarial vs. cooperative behavior of their political elites rather than in the degree of elitism per se.

With regard to the danger that fervent democrats would turn into anti-democrats, as Michels did, I was much too pessimistic. I do not see any signs of this anywhere. In the specific case of the Netherlands, the Democrats '66 have indeed been frustrated in almost all of their efforts at democratic reform, but they have remained a perfectly moderate pro-democratic party.

As far as measurable aspects of democratic quality are concerned, I have found that these uniformly favor consensus democracy. In *Patterns of Democracy* (1999), I show that the degree of consensus democracy is positively and significantly correlated with such measures of democratic quality as women's representation, voter participation and income equality. These correlations tend to remain strong and significant, and often become even stronger, when the influence of other relevant variables is controlled for and when extreme outliers are removed from the analysis (Lijphart 1999: 275-93).

### 4 Accountability

There remains the undoubtedly important question of accountability and identifiability, and here, almost by definition, majoritarian democracies have the edge. If one party is in power and has a governing majority, it can be given credit or blame for specific policies and also for how successfully government policies are implemented. When there are coalition cabinets and/or minority cabinets (and also in presidential systems when the president and the legislative majority belong to different parties), it is obviously much more difficult to identify who is responsible.

However, the critical questions that should be asked are: what is the purpose of accountability, and does the greater accountability in majoritarian systems achieve this purpose? It seems to me that the primary purpose is to keep the government in line with the voters' preferences. In the terminology of rational choice theory, this entails a principal-agent problem: how does the principal



(the voters) manage the agent (the government) in such a way that the agent does what the principal wants the agent to do? The answer that stresses the importance of accountability is: by being able to identify exactly who the agent is and by either retaining the agent (re-electing the government) or appointing a new agent (replacing the government), which majoritarian democracy enables the voters to do. If this argument is correct, one would expect governments in majoritarian democracies to be closer to the median voter than governments in consensus democracies. When the relative proximities are measured on a ten-point left-right scale, it turns out that there is a difference, but that it is the other way around: the distance between government and median voter is actually smaller – and to a statistically significant degree – in consensus democracies than in majoritarian democracies (Lijphart 1999: 287-88; see also, Powell 2000).

Another problem with the accountability argument is that, while in majoritarian democracies it is easy to identify the incumbent one-party government as the agent responsible for government policy, it is in practice difficult for the voters – that is, the majority of the voters – to remove this government. In Britain since 1945, for instance, all re-elected governments were re-elected in spite of majorities of the voters having voted for opposition parties, often majorities exceeding 55 per cent. An even more serious, albeit relatively rare, problem is that a government can be elected or re-elected in spite of having received fewer votes than its main rival, as happened in Britain in 1951, in New Zealand in 1978 and 1981, and in the United States in 2000.

Finally, as Lorelei Moosbrugger (2001) points out, the accountability of one-party majoritarian governments is a two-edged sword: it allows citizens to know and judge who is responsible for government policies but it also provides a clear and tempting target for interest group pressure. Therefore, especially when special interests are strong and well-organized and when the public interest has only weakly organized defenders, it may be easier for multiparty coalition governments with their diffuse accountability to make decisions favoring the public interest over special interests than it is for the highly accountable one-party governments. Moosbrugger argues that this difference can explain the better environmental record that she finds consensus democracies to have, and which I, using different indicators, have also found for the consensus systems (Lijphart 1999: 295-97).

If one wants to defend the accountability of majoritarian governments, this defense has to be based on accountability as an intrinsic value – and I feel at least some sympathy for this position. As discussed in the above paragraphs, however, it is very difficult to defend it on the basis of its instrumental effects.

## 5 Right-wing populism

The most serious charge that Andeweg levels at the consensus democracies is that they provide a fertile breeding ground for right-wing populist parties. I concede the strength of this correlation, although it is by no means a perfect correlation since there are three deviant cases among the thirteen countries that Andeweg discusses (if Finland is included). However, I think that it is not so much the dissatisfaction with the absence of competition among the major parties that feeds these right-wing parties as the chance that proportional representation offers them to get elected. I also believe that the dangers posed by the populist parties should not be exaggerated.

First of all, from a normative democratic perspective, one can argue that all parties, even distasteful ones, should have the right to compete and to be represented, with the possible exception of parties that are clearly and unquestionably committed to the overthrow of democracy. Second, it is probably also healthier for such parties to be represented rather than be suppressed. They only become dangerous when they become very large and especially if they are included in the government. But even then, the danger should not be overstated. The inclusion of the Freedom Party as a junior partner in the Austrian cabinet appears to have had the dual favorable effect of moderating its outlook and reducing its popular support. Another even more striking example is the inclusion of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), usually described as an extreme Hindu nationalist and anti-Muslim party, in the cabinet of India, and not just as a junior partner but as the largest party in a coalition cabinet headed by BJP leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee as prime minister. The BJP has had to take the views of its more than a dozen small coalition partners into consideration and has had to moderate its criticism of what it regards as the unjustified special privileges enjoyed by the Muslim minority.

What about the troubling example of the Weimar Republic where, according to Ferdinand Hermens' (1941) well-known argument, the Nazis were first given a political foothold by proportional representation and were then able to grow and to become the largest party (although never the majority party), which then allowed them to take over the government? The problem with Hermens' analysis is that proportional representation cannot be regarded as the only and not even as the key explanation for the rise of the Nazis. For one thing, the severe economic crisis and the poor operation of Weimar Germany's semi-presidential system also have to carry a major portion of the blame. For another, many other West European democracies had both proportional representation and small Nazi parties, but in none of these countries did the Nazis become a serious threat to democracy. From a normative point of view, it is hard to justify the denial of representation to all small parties, even perfectly pro-democratic parties but also more extreme but not anti-democratic parties, just to prevent small anti-democratic parties from



gaining parliamentary representation. A better way to bar anti-democratic parties, it seems to me, is a judicial procedure that permits democracies to outlaw parties that are clearly aimed at the abolition of democracy.

## 6 Consensus or compromise on policy issues

Andeweg is too generous in crediting me with one of the rare successful predictions in political science. In particular, I think that I was wrong in predicting that the weakening of political cleavages and the lessening of disagreements on major policies would eventually result in a 'depoliticized' political environment in which political parties were no longer divided by significant policy differences. The four traditional issue dimensions identified by Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan (1967) – socioeconomic, religious, cultural-ethnic, and urban-rural issues – have not uniformly declined in salience. Socioeconomic issue differences have become smaller and have also lost their ideological overtones since the 1960s, but important differences between left-wing and right-wing parties concerning government spending levels, taxation and welfare programs persist. Religious issue differences between Catholics and Protestants have all but disappeared, but on such issues as birth control, abortion, euthanasia and gay rights, the disagreement between religious and secular parties has increased since the 1960s. In linguistically divided countries like Belgium, Canada and Spain the cultural-ethnic issue dimension has also become more instead of less salient in recent decades. The rural-urban dimension has always been the least important of the four, even before the 1960s, but it has probably not declined further; although there are no longer any significant rural or agrarian parties, the question of the extent to which farming interests should be protected and subsidized remains a contentious issue.

In addition, even after the end of the Cold War, political parties in Western democracies often have divergent positions on foreign and defense policy. And environmentalism has become a new and very important issue dimension since the 1960s on which parties tend to have divergent outlooks. When I survey the political scene in the Netherlands since 1994, when the 'purple coalition' took office, I do not see a disappearance of issue differences at all, either between government (socialists, liberals, and Democrats '66) and opposition (mainly the Christian democratic party) or within the government coalition. On moral questions like abortion and euthanasia, government and opposition are far apart. Among the cabinet parties, there are clear differences on socioeconomic issues, especially taxes and government spending, which one would expect from parties that represent different socioeconomic constituencies. These coalition partners also diverge on the relative priority to

be assigned to the protection of the environment versus economic growth and individual freedom (e.g., public versus private transportation).

The pattern is similar in other Western countries. Even in the United States, where the two major parties have long been described as having very similar programs and where the two principal presidential candidates in the 2000 election were both moderate and centrist politicians, the election campaign and the first actions taken by the new Bush administration make it abundantly clear that the two sides are far apart on matters of taxation (how much tax relief and who should be the beneficiaries?), foreign and defense policy (especially the question of building a missile defense system), abortion, the funding of education (school vouchers), and a host of environmental issues. Instead of a contrast between 'compromises then, consensus now', I see no natural, pre-existing consensus on major issues in Western democracies and consequently a continuing need for compromise.

## 7 Conclusion

I am therefore not persuaded that I should modify my overall preference for consensus over majoritarian democracy. Consensus democracy may not be perfect, but in most respects it works better than majoritarian democracy: the pros outweigh the cons.

A final consideration is that a change from consensus to majoritarian democracy carries a high cost. As I show in *Patterns of Democracy*, proportional representation and a parliamentary form of government are the most powerful tools for engineering a consensus democracy (Lijphart 1999: 303-04). A shift to majoritarian democracy requires the abolition of proportional representation and/or the adoption of presidential government. Because of their parliamentary traditions and also because of the growing consensus among political scientists that presidentialism is a crisis-prone and deeply flawed system (Linz 1994), most West European democracies, including the Netherlands, are probably not tempted by the presidentialist alternative. This leaves the possibility of shifting to majoritarianism by adopting a majoritarian election system such as British-style plurality in single-member districts and abolishing proportional representation. This would run counter to the long-trend toward proportional representation – it was used by only a few countries in 1900 (see Rokkan 1970: 157) but by the vast majority of the world's democracies a century later – and would be, in my opinion, too high a price to pay.



## Notes

1. This article is based on my remarks in two debates with Rudy B. Andeweg on May 30, 2000, at the University of Leiden and on February 7, 2001, at Leiden University campus in The Hague. I am grateful to Professor Andeweg for proposing and organizing these debates and to both Professor Andeweg and the members of the two audiences for their valuable comments and suggestions.

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