

THE MODEL OF CONSOCIATIONAL DEMOCRACY, PRESENTED THROUGH THE EXAMPLE OF THE SWISS CONFEDERATION

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, it is spoken about the model of consociational democracy and its practical application in plural societies which are heterogeneous, which have gone through internal conflicts and which often are characterized by a certain line of division of the citizens on ethnic, religious, or linguistic basis. Often, this model represents the only possible solution for deeply divided societies, providing a stable political system, as opposed to deep societal segmentation.

The model of consociational democracy was designed with the aim to correct certain shortcomings of the majoritarian model which referred primarily to the right of the majority to introduce policies and to elect representatives. The majoritarian model of democracy, based on the will of the majority and the principle “winner takes all,” excludes the will of minorities and disables them from having their own input in decision-making, as well as their own political representatives. The consociational model of democracy, on the other hand, includes the will of more individuals, enabling greater democratization in the countries where it is applied.

There were doubts that the emergence of the consociational democracy model would not be suitable for small European democracies, emphasizing the differences between this model of democracy in some smaller European states and the majoritarian model that dominated in the United Kingdom, the USA, and France. However, the example of Switzerland shows the opposite.

By applying the method of content analysis and using official data from relevant institutions, this paper analyzes the model of consociational democracy in Switzerland. This model is typical for this federal state, which continuously strengthens opportunities for democratic participation. The use of various instruments that include minorities as much as possible, along with decision-making based on consensus and negotiations among parties, represents a vital political characteristic of this small European state with a wide range of diversity.

Keywords: Power-sharing, proportional, compromise, negotiation, consensus

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Introduction

Alongside the classical division of democratic political systems, which refers to the existence of presidential and parliamentary systems as ideal types, as well as the introduction of a third (mixed) type — semi-presidential or semi-parliamentary — there exists a model built upon the analysis of the experiences and specificities of several Western European political systems. The examples of political systems that exist in these countries demonstrate the institutional structure and design of consociational democracy, as a completely opposite model from the majoritarian model of democracy.

As a response to the dilemmas concerning the stability of the system and democratization, fairness, equal opportunities, in the late 1960s of the 20th century, the Theory of Consociational Democracy emerged, which today is more widely known under the name power-sharing system or consociational democracy. This theory is also known as a strategy for peace-building in post-conflict societies. (Vankovska, 2014, p.119-122)

The consociational system understands democracy as the existence of a broad agreement among political parties and elites, which are considered to represent different social segments, and the model of consociational democracy is characterized by inclusion (of as many actors as possible in decision-making), negotiation, and compromise.(Ibid, 2014.p.121)

The theory of consociationalism has great practical value and represents a specific guide for the concrete design of the power-sharing system, autonomy, as well as the other consociational elements. This model of democracy, which stands as an alternative to the majoritarian model of democracy, provides a stable political system, in contrast to deep societal segmentation. It is particularly optimal and necessary for pluralistic societies, considering the fact that it offers a possible solution for heterogeneous societies where there are deep lines of division among citizens based on various grounds. (Lijphart, 1999, p.32)

As for the majoritarian model, it enables the legitimization of the dictatorship of the majority, which produces more conflicts than democracy, and such a divided society is characterized by high conflict potential. (Vankovska, 2014, p.120) Under such conditions, at the national level, it is almost impossible to differentiate a civic entity, and within the society itself, there are often opposing and competitive identities, which weakly identify with the national community. In such societies, a

democratic system is needed that emphasizes consensus, which more often includes rather than excludes actors in the exercise of power. (Lijphart, 1999, p. 34)

Instead of the principle “winner takes all,” certain characteristics of consociational democracy — such as: power-sharing, proportional representation, balance between the executive and legislative branches, dualism (two legislative bodies), political pluralism, and the like — make it possible that no single party or group dominates the leadership position. Proportional representation — the reserved seats for representatives of minorities proportionate to their presence — ensures that no party or group is completely excluded from the bodies that make decisions, and through the inclusion of a broader majority of representatives, greater satisfaction is achieved. (Eagan at al., 2007, pg.141) Namely, the goal of consensus is to ensure that all sides are represented and heard, whereby this model can be integrated both at the national and local level.

Main Characteristics of the Model

The aim of the consociational democracy model is to create a representative system that should guarantee stability in deeply divided societies. According to Lijphart, its main characteristics are the following:

1. Joint power-sharing between the majority and the minority, i.e., the existence of a government formed by a grand coalition composed of the leaders of all significant societal segments. The grand coalition represents a framework for coordination and adaptation among all participants.
2. The right of veto for the representatives of each segment is considered an additional guarantee that all sides will have equal influence over decision-making. This is also an effective way of protecting individual rights and interests.
3. Fair distribution of power (proportional representation) leads to proportional distribution of authority among segments in different spheres. Proportionality is most often ensured through the allocation of seats in parliament by applying a proportional electoral model or by securing so-called reserved seats for representatives of communities. Proportionality can also refer to the access to positions in public administration, the judiciary, the army and police, public enterprises and institutions Vankovska, 2014, p.122-125)

4. Autonomy of groups (segments) provides effective protection of the interests of each minority. That is, minorities have power in the domain of internal policy, especially in the areas of education and culture. (Mogollon, p.11) This includes: administrative, territorial, cultural autonomy, and similar forms of political-legal self-governance.

When forming the consociational model of democracy, it is not necessary for all four basic characteristics to be present, while the main feature of the system is its flexibility.

Instead of concentrating power in the hands of the majority, the consociational model attempts to share and disperse it, maintaining power in different ways. The application of the model's elements can be observed in societies that exhibit the following characteristics:

- Balance of power among segments of society;
- Existence of a multiparty system;
- Small size of the state;
- Association of interest groups;
- Existence of a federal and decentralized state;
- Strong bicameralism;
- Rigidity of the Constitution;
- Judicial control and
- Independence of the central bank (Lijphart, 2012, p.34-41).

The foundational and empirical basis of Lijphart's theory of consociationalism derives from past experiences in certain Western European democracies (the Netherlands, Switzerland, Belgium, and Austria), although today there is discussion about the presence of elements of this model also in Canada, Denmark, and Italy. Although in some of these countries there is a tendency to move away from consociational elements and gradually shift toward the majoritarian model of democracy, this does not diminish the attractiveness of this model. According to some authors, the examples on which Lijphart built his theory are not the most appropriate. For instance, the cleavage lines in the Netherlands were never deep enough to threaten the state's survival, and Dutch patriotism was a unifying force as early as the 16th century. Switzerland, despite the diversity of nations, religions, and languages, was never a divided society (Vankovska, 2014, p.129).

The Model in Switzerland

The model of consociational democracy emerged from the idea of consociational democracy which, according to Lijphart, was typical for small European states. These European democracies (Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Switzerland) were stable, but they were not characterized by alternation of power. That is, the larger parties conducted negotiations over political directions, even though they were not constantly represented in government. According to this, the consociational forms of democracy were more suitable for these new democracies, unlike the existing model (McGrann&Latner, 2006, p.3).

Thanks to its diversity, the model that exists in the Swiss Confederation represents a unique system of consociational democracy.

Switzerland belongs to the category of federal parliamentary democratic republics, where the Federal Council represents the main body that carries out the executive power within the multi-party system, which is counted among the most stable in the world. The federal legislative power is divided between the Government and the two chambers of the Federal Assembly. The President of the Swiss Confederation, along with the Vice President, is elected by the Federal Assembly from among the members of the Federal Council, on the principle of rotation with a one-year mandate, which they carry out simultaneously. The role of the President of the Swiss Confederation is largely ceremonial.

The model of consociational democracy in Switzerland is demonstrated in practice through the fulfillment of the following characteristics:

1. A characteristic distribution of executive power in broad coalition cabinets, where the so-called “magic formula” is used, established in 1959. (Bühlmann, Nicolet, & Selb, 2006, p. 7) This so-called magic formula is based on the belief that decisions can only be made if supported both by the minority and the majority. Power is divided among the Confederation, the 26 cantons, and 2,131 municipalities.

According to the principle of consensus, majority parties share executive power through the possibility of forming a broad coalition. The national executive authority, represented by the Federal Council, consists of seven members elected by Parliament according to the 2:2:2:1 formula, which allows appropriate representation of linguistic groups according to their demographic size. The seven members (representatives of the four largest parties) function to ensure consensus on the most important issues that determine the general political direction of this pluralistic society.

2. The executive-legislative balance of power refers to the manner in which the members of the Council are elected, namely: individually for a previously determined period of 4 years, and according to the Constitution, the legislative body cannot vote a motion of no confidence during that period. If a proposal from the Government does not pass in Parliament, neither the member who submitted it, nor the Federal Council, is required to resign. This formal separation of powers allows for greater independence and balance, considering the fact that the Swiss political system is neither purely parliamentary nor purely presidential. (Lijphart, 1999, p. 35)

3. Multiparty system. Switzerland has a multiparty system composed of a large number of parties, none of which holds independent power, but instead all cooperate with one another. The most recent elections for the Federal Council in Switzerland took place in 2023. Among the prominent parties on the political scene in Switzerland, the following can be mentioned: the People's Party, the Social Democratic Party, the Liberal Democratic Party, the Liberal-Green Party, the Green Party, the Radical-Liberal Party, the Centrist Party, and many others that are adequately represented in the Swiss Parliament.

Of course, among the political parties there are certain distinguishing differences, the most characteristic being: religious matters, which divide on one side the Christian Democrats (usually supported by active Catholics), and on the other side the Social Democrats and the Radical Democrats (who receive most support from Catholics who almost never attend church), as well as the Protestants. Another difference is socioeconomic, separating the Social Democrats (mainly supported by the working class) from the Radical Democrats (mainly supported by the middle class). The Swiss People's Party is mostly supported by Protestant farmers. (Lijphart, 1999, p. 36-37)

Regarding language – there are no significant linguistic divisions in the Swiss multiparty system, considering that there are four official languages, and 22 out of 26 cantons officially are unilingual.

4. Proportional representation.

The seats in both chambers of the Swiss parliament are distributed among the parties proportionally to the number of votes received.

5. Association of interest groups.

The system that exists in Switzerland emphasizes consensus rather than confrontation. Association is based on the coordination of groups and the existence of a relatively small number of large interest groups. A notable characteristic is the fact that workers' associations are not as well organized and are less influential compared to employers' associations.

6. Federal and decentralized power.

Switzerland is a federal state in which power is divided between the central institutions and the institutions of the 26 cantons, which have their own separate laws, holidays, and languages. Based on this, Switzerland is considered one of the most decentralized countries in the world. (Lijphart, 1999, p. 38)

7. Strong bicameral system.

The Federal Assembly is composed of:

- The Council of States (Upper or Federal Chamber), consisting of 46 representatives elected for a period of four years, representing the cantons, with each canton having two representatives.
- The Lower Chamber, which represents the Swiss people and is also called the National Council (200 representatives elected by the citizens based on the principle of proportional representation, for a term of four years).

The existence of a bicameral system arises from the need for special representation of minorities in either the upper or lower house, while the principle of “complete equality” of the two chambers represents a sacred rule in Switzerland.

8. Rigidity of the Constitution.

The first Swiss Federal Constitution was adopted on May 29, 1874. The current Constitution, which came into force on January 1, 2000, is a written document that contains the basic rules and principles for the exercise of power and can only be amended with the consent of a qualified majority. Any proposed amendments to the Swiss Constitution must receive support in a referendum not only from the overall majority of the people but also from the majority of the majority of cantons. The Constitution limits federal influence in forming internal policy and emphasizes the role of the cantons. (Lijphart, 1999, p. 40)

9. Judicial power.

The judiciary in Switzerland is independent and is represented by the Federal Supreme Court — the Tribunal. This court is responsible for legal protection of federal laws, for international public law, and the law of the cantons, including the regulation and protection of constitutional rights in the cantons and municipal autonomy.

10. Independence of the Central Bank.

The Swiss National Bank is considered one of the strongest and most independent central banks in the world. (Lijphart, 1999, p. 41)

Switzerland is a country that, within the global democratic framework, can most appropriately be counted as a direct democracy, and this is regulated through the existence of three key pillars: referendums, popular initiatives, and the recall mechanism.

It is no coincidence that Switzerland is called the “land of referendums.” Namely, with every constitutional amendment, a referendum must be held, and additionally, a referendum may be initiated by request to change existing laws. The combination of the referendum and popular initiative gives a chance to the numerical minority to challenge laws adopted by the majority-elected representatives. Through the popular initiative, there is even the possibility to propose constitutional amendments. Therefore, the existence of referendums and popular initiatives represents a strong incentive for the majority to care for minorities. The right to recall, on the other hand, allows the people of Switzerland to, through petition or referendum, remove a previously elected representative.

Switzerland is characterized by its policy of neutrality, which was established at the Congress of Vienna in 1815. This is an authentic feature of its foreign policy. As a result of this neutrality, Switzerland has managed not to become involved in any international conflict since 1815, while playing a unique role in international diplomacy and global humanitarian crises.

In light of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine (since February 2024), Switzerland adopted certain EU sanctions against Russia. This has sparked debate within the country regarding its direction and the future of its neutral position. Today, political parties and citizens are increasingly expressing differing opinions regarding whether Switzerland should

maintain its neutral status in the future, especially in light of upcoming geopolitical developments.

This very issue is at the core of a popular initiative, which is expected to be put to a vote in 2026.

Criticism of the Consociational Democracy Model

There are certain doubts and controversies related to this model, primarily concerning the question of the quality of the key concepts of consociation, which are vague and difficult to measure and define precisely.

Most of the criticism of consociational democracy refers to its distinctly elitist character. Namely, there is often no gravitational center of power that would promote and protect the public interest. Negotiations frequently lack strategy, leading to endless compromises, which can sometimes be irrational and unprincipled. The absence of a political opposition means there is no strong control mechanism. The lack of winners and losers eliminates the essential test of a democracy — that is, a peaceful transition of power from the outgoing government to the new winners.

Secret diplomatic negotiations among elites lead to a completely non-transparent politics. This model is considered an unfavorable framework for fostering individualism and individual freedoms and rights among individuals and citizens, who are forced to identify only with their collectives. (Vankovska, 2014, p. 133) There is often a relativization of the power of public opinion and fragmentation in the media space.

Moreover, consociationalism is a very costly and slow process. Some of the criticisms of the consociational democracy model relate to inefficiency. Reaching consensus requires more time and is often ambiguous, which in turn produces weaker policies. Attempts to secure consensus sometimes result in deadlock when groups are deeply divided among themselves. (Eagan et al., 2007)

Concluding Observations

Despite the controversies and criticisms directed at the concept of consociational democracy, certain aspects that it raises cannot be denied — one of them being the highlighting of the unfairness of the majoritarian principle.

As for elitism, it can be noted that although consociational democracy is inherently elitist, this shortcoming can be corrected through skillful incorporation of elements of direct democracy and other mechanisms for citizen participation and accountability.

Decision-making through consensus strengthens unity and reduces division. Participants in the process of consensual decision-making have strong hope that their interests will be taken into account, and as a result of increased participation, they are more committed to achieving outcomes. When the process is based on consensus, more information is included, more perspectives are considered, and the pluralism of different viewpoints is taken into account. Consensual democracies enable the reduction of antagonism between opposing groups. (Eagan et al., 2007) Sharing executive power moderates extreme demands and eliminates manifestations of intolerance.

By making them direct participants and guarantors of power, constitutional norms are upheld.

The greatest advantage lies in ensuring peaceful coexistence among different groups and in the continuous management of conflict. Leaders promote reconciliation and acceptance of compromise among members of their own community. (Vankovska, 2014, p. 126)

It is considered that the true test for consociational formulas is found in those countries where they are part of the so-called peace process, and where they enable the establishment of a stable democratic political system that leads to a peaceful and stable society. It is believed that especially in pluralistic societies, such as Switzerland, flexibility is achieved through the existence of the consociational formula.

Switzerland today represents an example of successful consociational democracy, and its success is largely measured by the degree to which it has surpassed the prescriptions of consociationalism and turned toward the principles of normal democracy.

However, the realization of the consensual model is not possible without the existence of a consensual political culture and the behavior of political elites. It refers to a combination of rules and principles, mostly unwritten and informal, which should dominate the functioning of this model and represent the foundation for building the institutions of consensual democracy and their interconnection.

I believe that the fundamental success of consensual political culture lies in respecting the spirit of togetherness, which represents a general principle toward which all states should strive.

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