Essay

Is it Right in 2015 to Describe Northern Ireland as a "Consociational" Democracy?

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Abstract

Arend Lijphart suggested that there was a form of democracy designed for countries in a "power sharing" agreement. Whilst he conceived his theory to apply to his home country – the Netherlands – it could very well be that his theory can apply elsewhere. This outlines the basic premise of this essay, with Northern Ireland being a potential candidate in this case.

The essay begins by exploring what consociationalism is, before then exploring politics in the context of Northern Ireland. To begin the substantive discussion, the essay applies consociationalism theory to Northern Ireland, whilst starting as a "checklist"; one can soon realise that Northern Ireland does not fit the typical model of consociational democracies. However, we find that it does have a power-sharing model, and the essay concludes that whilst not having all the hallmarks of consociationalism, Northern Ireland could be said to have some form of a consociational democracy.

Keywords: Northern Ireland, Consociationalism, Arend Lijphart, Democracy, Consociational Democracy

Introduction

Northern Ireland is an interesting "anomaly" in the political setup of the United Kingdom. Every other constituent part of the United Kingdom has a political system which has the potential to

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return single-party governments, with coalitions occurring as a result of electoral choice rather than constitutional necessity. This is not the case in Northern Ireland however. This essay seeks to explore whether a form of government, known as consociationalism, exists in Ireland. As will be shown, "consociationalism" is so unique that one cannot depend solely on textbooks to define it, or define examples thereof, and thus, this essay seeks to show that one should consider a practical example – that of Northern Ireland - since practice differs from theory.

What is Consociationalism?

As Lijphart (2004) suggests, it is immediately obvious that deep societal divisions create a great problem for democracy. He states that there are two essential aspects to consociationalism: power sharing and the autonomy of each constituent group. He defines power sharing as the idea that all groups involved should participate in making decisions. This is especially true at the executive level. He defines group autonomy as two groups being autonomous in their own affairs, especially education and culture (Lijphart, 1977). Robert Dahl also states that all of the significant leaders of a plural society should be involved in decision making, and that there should be a power for decisions about subcultures to be taken by the leaders of that particular subculture (Dahl, 1989). This essentially recharacterises Lijphart's statements above.

It could be argued that consociational democracy is the epitome of compromise. Bentley defines compromise as the process whereby groups with mutual interests interact (Bentley, 1955). Consociational governments are usually comprised of such groups (or groups from various parts of society joined together by one uniting feature), joining for the good of the country.

In the context of Northern Ireland, McEvoy posits that consociationalism is how interethnic conflict can be managed (McEvoy, 2008). This could be borne out through O'Leary's statement that inclusion of radical parties in Government seeks to moderate, whilst their exclusion puts the stability of power sharing at risk (McGarry & O'Leary, 2004).

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Finally, Lijphart sets out four elements that are necessary for a consociational democracy to remain in place:

1. The ability of elites to accommodate divergent interests and demands within their own culture.
2. The elites must be able to transcend cleavages and cooperate with elites from other cultures within their society.
3. The elites must be committed to maintain the status quo and improve its coherency.
4. The elites must understand the results of political fragmentation.

This is based on Lijphart's secondary definition of consociational democracy as a process whereby a country with a fragmented democracy develops a stable democracy (Lijphart, 2008). Lijphart's definition has been unquestioned, and thus it is his defintion used throughout this essay.

An Introduction to Northern Irish Politics

Before embarking on the substance of this discussion – whether the Government of Northern Ireland is consociational in nature – it is worth examining the context of politics in Northern Ireland.

The Belfast Agreement (commonly known as the Good Friday Agreement) created three "strands" of Government. They are the Northern Ireland Executive and the Northern Ireland Assembly; cooperation between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland through the North-South Ministerial Council and related bodies; and cooperation between the Governments of Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland.

Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly are required – upon taking their seats – to designate themselves as members of one of three categories: "unionist", "nationalist", or "other". "Unionists"

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wish to remain within the United Kingdom. "Nationalists" are those who would favour Northern Ireland joining the Republic as one country. This is important because in some matters of importance (such as election of the Presiding Officer of the Assembly), cross community agreement is required – i.e. agreement is needed from both the unionists and the nationalists (McEvoy, 2008).

The Northern Ireland Executive is also representative of this idea of general intercommunity; the post of First Minister of Northern Ireland must be held by a person from the largest party according to community designation, with the post of Deputy First Minister going to the second biggest party by community designation. For instance, in the current executive, the Democratic Unionist Party (the DUP) is the largest party by community designation, therefore Peter Robinson, a representative thereof, is the First Minister. Since Sinn Fein is the second biggest such party, Gerry Adams is the Deputy First Minister (McEvoy, 2008).

Is Northern Ireland a Consociational Democracy?

In this section, it is necessary to take the elements of consociationalism explored above, and attempt to apply them to Northern Ireland. This part of the discussion begins with the proposition that Northern Ireland is a consociational democracy. In examining the effects of the Belfast Agreement – which set up the current Irish political system – on governance in Northern Ireland, Paul Mitchell has stated that Parliamentary democracy, as is commonly defined, is not known in Northern Ireland (Mitchell, 2001). If this is so, then the Belfast Agreement has surely failed. Yet, it appears that the Belfast Agreement has broadly achieved what it set out to do; restore some form of government to Northern Ireland. To explore this further, Mitchell has given the classic definition of a parliamentary democracy as executive accountability to the legislature, by and through procedures of no confidence (Mitchell, 2001). However, Northern Ireland is not a classic parliamentary democracy, as Mitchell states that neither the diarchy of the First and Deputy First Ministers, nor the entire Executive, can be dismissed en masse, for whilst the Assembly can remove a single minister by votes of no confidence, the party from which he comes will nominate a replacement for him. Therefore, due to the nature of the Belfast Agreement, consociationalism (or power sharing) is built-in and unavoidable.

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Within the Assembly itself, consociationalism is ingrained. For certain key decisions, there must be intercommunity agreement, obtained through one of two measures – either "parallel consent" or "weighted majority". This arises because of a rule under the Standing Orders of the Assembly that requires members to designate themselves as part of one or two "communities": nationalists, or unionists (see above for a fuller description). Failure to make such a designation automatically leads to the Member being designated as "other". Mitchell states that in order for something to pass the Assembly through the parallel consent procedure, there must be an absolute majority voting in favour from both communities. The less onerous "weighted majority" procedure requires that there should be 40% of votes from each bloc in favour, and 60% of all the votes overall (Mitchell, 2001).

Lijphart refers to the need for a "grand coalition", asserting that one of the primary characteristics of consociational democracy is that all of the leaders of various populations in a society should work together to govern the country (Lijphart, 1977).

It appears that the Northern Irish Government is a "grand coalition" as described above. The Northern Ireland Executive works on a "cross-community basis" (Bew, 2006). By Tonge's description, it appears that the Northern Irish executive is almost certainly a "grand coalition"; he describes the Northern Irish Executive as being created from members of the Northern Ireland Assembly depending on the D'Hondt method of selection (Tonge, 2005). Due to the need for cross-community representation, and the nature of how D'Hondt works, representatives from both major sectors of society in Northern Ireland (Catholics/republicans, represented by Sinn Fein, and Protestants/unionists, represented by the Democratic Unionist Party), will be included in the Government. Therefore, the first element of Lijphart's definition of consociational democracy is met.

Lijphart then goes on to state that government should be by mutual veto, as described above, or concurrent majority (where there is a majority in both communities). Lijphart actually subdivides

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this concept into three sub-concepts: the mutual veto itself, proportionality, and segmental autonomy. These are all apparently interrelated (Lijphart, 1977), and thus will be explored in turn.

The mutual (or minority) veto is provided in order to allow each individual interest group involvement in the Government to protect itself. Of course, as Lijphart points out, the problem with the minority veto is that it can lead to tyranny by minority – that is, the minority will continue to veto the majority. Of course, this can backfire as each separate constituent community has its own veto; meaning the veto could be used in turn against the minority (Lijphart, 1977). It is arguable that the "mutual veto" exists in Northern Ireland. More often than not, the Northern Irish Government has collapsed (or had its powers withdrawn by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland) because the various parties have disagreed with each other – or vetoed one another. Indeed, Northern Ireland's longest suspension of Government occurred in 2002 after Sinn Fein refused to power share – effectively vetoing the government – due to an alleged IRA spy ring in which they were implicated (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2002).

The next concept falling under the heading of "mutual veto" is the idea of proportionality. Jurg Steiner defines this as all groups influencing a decision in proportion to their numerical strength. This means that when parties have a numerical advantage, they wield more influence over a decision (Steiner, 1971). This is evidently present in Northern Ireland. As explored above, the Northern Irish Executive is proportional by design – one must recall that the Executive is drawn from all parties on a "cross-community" basis. However, whether or not there is numerical representation when making decisions is a different matter. Whilst up to three ministers of the Executive can request a cross-community vote, this in no way represents proportionality as defined by Steiner, since the quorum for such cross-community votes is seven ministers, considering the fact that there are six unionists, five nationalists and two "others" (Alliance Party members). Thus, there is not much in the way of proportionality by numbers. Therefore – for the moment – it is best for us to say that there is no conclusive evidence as to whether there is, or there is not, proportionality as defined by Steiner in Northern Ireland. Since this is an element required of

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consociational democracies, we cannot now wholly say that Northern Ireland is consociational. Nevertheless, we continue examining the other elements of consociational democracy.

A third subhead of Lijphart's discussions of mutual veto is "segmental autonomy", which he describes as the minority governing its own affairs (Lijphart, 1977). Lijphart is stating that when there are decisions to be made that affect a certain segment of society, that segment should be left alone to make the decisions. The exception to this rule occurs when there are decisions to be made on matters that are of mutual concern (such as, in our case, who the Government is). This does not appear to happen in Northern Ireland. For example, whilst peace lines constructed by the British Army during the British occupation of Belfast (Lauber, 2008) divide Belfast, this does not mean that the nationalists and unionists are autonomous in themselves. Considering how the Northern Irish Government is established (see discussion above regarding mutual veto), and since Belfast City Council is elected under a traditional first past the post electoral system (albeit from multimember constituencies), there is no possibility for any form of consociationalism in this regard.

Lijphart suggests that federalism may also be a potential means to achieve consociational democracy (Lijphart, 1977). This would not work in Northern Ireland. The British constitutional arrangement for Northern Ireland is unwilling to countenance a possible federalism as is known in the traditional sense of the word (save some semi-federalism in the division between local and regional government).

Thus far, a conclusion appears that Northern Ireland is not a consociational democracy. However, it can be assessed further. Lijphart goes on to discuss favourable conditions for consociational democracy. He states that in order for consociational democracy to work, the following factors must be present:

1. A commitment by leaders to democratic practices.
2. Commitment to maintaining the unity of the country.

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3. Willingness to cooperate with their counterparts from other segments of society.
4. Leaders must be able to maintain the support of their followers.

(Lijphart, 1977)

Examining Northern Ireland, one can see that thus far, the leaders of Northern Ireland have committed themselves to working towards democracy, through the First and Deputy First Ministers' negotiating power sharing deals after every election, or when new powers are devolved to the province (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2010). For the same reasons, it appears that the Northern Irish Executive is quite committed to maintaining the country's unity. Due to the power sharing, leaders of Northern Ireland evidently cooperate with each other, and, finally, they manage to maintain the support of their own followers.

Everything explored above leads to another strange conclusion. Perhaps, the consociational requirements and the favourable conditions described by Lijphart are not a blueprint that can be applied to every situation; it may depend on the constitutional setup of each individual country. For instance, the Belfast Agreement premises that there be a "grand coalition" of sorts (described above), and a mutual veto. These are but two of Lijphart's requirements for consociational democracies. However, as we have seen, the remaining elements are not met, since they are not envisaged in the Belfast Agreement. Therefore, in theory, consociational democracy in Northern Ireland should fail, but it does not. There are still the favourable conditions described above to consider; as has briefly been shown, these are fulfilled.

Conclusion

Returning to the assertion made at the beginning of the previous section, "Is Northern Ireland a Consociational Democracy?", it was posited that consociational democracy exists in Northern Ireland, and so it does – but not according to Lijphart's requirements for consociational democracy, especially when considering his devotion of an entire section of his book to describing why

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Northern Ireland is not consociational (Lijphart, 1977). For the reasons set out above, we disagree, and therefore, conclude that consociationalism depends more upon whether states meet the "favourable conditions" set out above (with some influence from Lijphart's definition), rather than Lijphart's definition alone. For all the reasons set out above, it is quite evident that Northern Ireland appears to be a consociational democracy – though not a traditional one.

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