

Concept

Consociationalism

Definition

Consociationalism is a form of democracy which seeks to regulate the sharing of power in a state that comprises diverse societies (distinct ethnic, religious, national or linguistic groups), by allocating these groups collective rights. The executive-power sharing is mainly characterized by proportional representation, veto rights and segmental autonomy for minority groups.

In recent years, it has become a major demand of Israeli Arabs.

Background

Consociationalism stands in contrast to the concept of 'majoritarian democracy'.¹ Majoritarian systems call for the *integration* of minority groups and the distribution of individual rights solely. However, the consociationalist approach consists in *accommodating* minorities, by granting them collective rights.

There are four characteristics of Consociationalism:²

- **Executive power-sharing** – forming a 'grand coalition' with leaders representing all significant segments of society. The institutional expression of the 'grand coalition' is a multi-party cabinet.³
- **Mutual Veto** – giving groups within a state the right to veto the government's decision-making. It will thus be necessary to reach mutual agreement among all parties in the executive.⁴
- **Proportional Representation** – enabling groups to be a part of the state's decision-making and to have their voice heard in the highest instances of policy-making.
- **Segmental Autonomy** – giving minority groups the possibility for self-rule within the boundaries of the state.

¹ "Majoritarian democracies ... typically have first-past-the-post electoral systems, only two major political parties, single-party cabinets, unicameralism, and unitary and centralized government." (Mainwaring, S., "Two Models of Democracy," **Journal of Democracy**, Volume 12, Number 3, July 2001, pp. 170-175.)

² Bligh, A., **The Israeli Palestinians**, Frank Cass Publishers: London, 2003, p. 24

³ In Switzerland, the executive powers are shared among seven members of the national executive, according to the "magic formula": 2-2-2-1. Thus all linguistic groups are given representation in proportions to their size. (Sitnikov, A., **Consociational Democracy**, Published in Stanford University. [Click here.](#))

⁴ The Netherlands, Belgium and Austria are examples of established democracies, "with plural societies containing distinct ethnic communities divided by language, religion, and region, with constitutions characterized by multiple veto-points and extensive power-sharing." (Norris, P., **Ethnic Pluralism and Consociational Democracy Revisited**, Paper presentation at the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, September 2005, p.3-4).

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Rather than having a particular structure, Consociationalism could take different forms in different places,⁵ and the division of power between the central government and the autonomous political units varies.⁶

⁵ "Consociational arrangements, ...need not be comprehensive: they may be confined to distinct constitutional and policy sectors (in the domain of the politics of identity, recognition, and constitutional change); or they may be applied piecemeal where they are deemed necessary. They need not be mechanically applied throughout the entirety of politics." (O'Leary, B., **Debating Consociational Politics**, Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, August 03, p.19.) For full article, [click here](#).

See also: Lijphart, A., Typologies of Democratic Systems, **Comparative Political Studies**, Volume 1, Sage Journals Publications, April 1968, pp. 3-44.

⁶ Or any other type of quasi-autonomous region, e.g. cantons in Switzerland. For more details on the distinctions between types and dimensions of democracy, [click here](#).