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Still Consociational? Belgian Democracy, 50 Years After 'The Politics of Accommodation'

Didier Caluwaerts & Min Reuchamps[*]

Abstract

Despite the enduring importance of Lijphart's work for understanding democracy in Belgium, the consociational model has come under increasing threat. Owing to deep political crises, decreasing levels of trust in elites, increasing levels of ethnic outbidding and rising demands for democratic reform, it seems as if Lijphart's model is under siege. Even though the consociational solution proved to be very capable of transforming conflict into cooperation in Belgian politics in the past, the question we raise in this article is whether and to what extent the 'politics of accommodation' is still applicable to Belgian democracy. Based on an in-depth analysis of the four institutional (grand coalition, proportionality, mutual veto rights and segmental autonomy) and one cultural (public passivity) criteria, we argue that consociational democracy's very nature and institutional set-up has largely hollowed out its potential for future conflict management.

Keywords: Belgium, consociational democracy, Lijphart, federalism, ethnolinguistic conflict.

1 Introduction

Belgium has traditionally been considered a deeply divided society, that is, a polity characterized by mutually reinforcing cleavages. Until the 1960s, these deep, mutually reinforcing cleavages dividing citizens seemed to demarcate the natural frontiers of a viable democracy. In such a divided society, it was thought that democracy would inevitably collapse. Paradoxically, however, Belgium is often praised for its ability to settle internal tensions and divisions peacefully.

It is this democratic paradox between societal division and democratic stability that is at the basis of Arend Lijphart's long-standing contribution to the study of politics in the Low Countries. From 1968 onwards, he published a series of

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books and articles laying the foundation for what he called the consociational model of democracy (Lijphart, 1968a, 1968b, 1968c). These works posited that divided societies could be turned into stable democracies only as long as two important conditions were met. On the one hand, contacts between conflicting groups in a country should be left to the political elites, who had to develop a 'spirit of accommodation' and an attitude of prudent leadership (Lijphart, 1975). More specifically, this accommodative behaviour on behalf of the elites was the by-product of four institutional features: (1) grand coalition, (2) proportionality, (3) mutual veto and (4) segmental autonomy (Lijphart, 1969, 1977). On the other hand, consociationalism was also based on one cultural assumption. Lijphart – along with Belgian sociologist Luc Huyse (1970) – argued that the consociational model of democracy would work only as long as the citizens remained passive. This culture of popular passivity meant that citizens should not engage in the wider political debate, and certainly not in discussion across divides, because grass-roots participation would only jeopardize the already fragile balance between the segments.

Despite the enduring importance of Lijphart's work for understanding democracy in Belgium, the consociational model has come under increasing threat (Andeweg, 2019). In recent decades, we have witnessed deep political crises (Deschouwer & Reuchamps, 2013), decreasing levels of trust in elites (Deschouwer, Delwit, Hooghe, Baudewyns, & Walgrave, 2015), increasing levels of ethnic outbidding (Sinardet, 2010) and rising demands for democratic reform (Caluwaerts, Biard, Jacquet, & Reuchamps, 2017). It therefore seems as if consociationalism is under siege. Even though the consociational solution proved to be very capable of transforming conflict into cooperation in Belgian politics in the past, the question we raise in this article is whether and to what extent the 'politics of accommodation' is still applicable to Belgian democracy. In other words, to what extent are the consociational devices still capable of transforming and managing ethnolinguistic conflict in Belgium?

In this article, we argue that the institutional and cultural characteristics of consociationalism are indeed under increasing pressure. To some extent, consociational democracy's very nature and institutional set-up has hollowed out its potential for future conflict management. For instance, federalism, which was initially meant to reduce ethnolinguistic tensions, has set in motion demands for more autonomy. Also, proportionality, which was initially meant to buy off the peace, has made it increasingly difficult to use financial sweeteners in dealing with ethnolinguistic conflicts. And decades of public deference have increased demands for democratic reform and citizen involvement, which could potentially undermine the prudent leadership necessary for peaceful conflict management.

In the remainder of this article, we first discuss the theoretical roots and foundations of the consociational model of democracy. We then explain how consociationalism is intrinsically interwoven with Belgian history. In the third section, we look at the challenges facing each of the institutional and cultural characteristics of Belgian consociational democracy. Finally, we draw some conclusion about the long-term viability of consociationalism and the applicability of 'the politics of accommodation' in Belgium.

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2 Consociational Democracy

Lijphart's point of departure in developing his consociational model was centrifugal democracy. In such a democracy, cleavages are coinciding rather than cross-cutting, which, according to the theory of social pluralism, should lead to instability (Dahl, 1967, p. 277; Dahrendorf, 1959, p. 215). The absence of cross-pressures, which characterizes such deeply divided societies, implies that group memberships are strongly interrelated. This interpenetration of group loyalties means that segments constantly align against identical segments in all conflicts (Lijphart, 1968a, p. 179). Such coinciding group memberships seriously undermine the potential for conflict resolution.

Moreover, the adverse effects of mutually reinforcing cleavages are amplified because majority and minority statuses do not fluctuate. In centrifugal democracies, patterns of ruling and being ruled remain steady and the majoritarian solution does not work (Lijphart, 1981b). A two-party system and a majoritarian electoral system, which should lead to a frequent alternation of those in power, and gives current minorities an outlook on forming a majority themselves in the future, do not work when political activity steadily follows the lines of societal segmentation (Kaiser, 2002; Mitchell, 2003, pp. 440-441). Concentrating power in the hands of a majority, therefore, permanently denies minorities access to the decision-making arena. This perpetual exclusion of minority groups from power because of overlapping memberships fosters majority tyranny rather than democracy (Lijphart, 1984).

Deeply divided societies are therefore highly susceptible to disintegration. Lijphart argues, however, that cross-cutting memberships are not a necessary condition for democratic stability. Rather, he amends the pluralist cross-pressure hypothesis when stating that "overarching cooperation at the elite-level can perform the same function as crosscutting linkages at lower levels" (Lijphart, 1968c, pp. 191, translation by the authors). The deep, mutually reinforcing cleavages in society therefore do not have to undermine democratic stability, as long as they are bridged at the elite level. The 'missing link' (Bogaards, 1998, p. 475) between a plural society and political stability is, according to Lijphart (1968b), thus elite behaviour.

To explain this pattern of overarching elite cooperation, Lijphart introduces the concept of a self-denying prophecy (Lijphart, 1968c, p. 190). The social pluralist prediction that segmented societies with mutually reinforcing cleavages and coinciding memberships are bound to disintegrate can be actively avoided by deliberate actions on behalf of the elites. The awareness that segmentation leads to instability and conflict inhibits the elites to behave in an adversarial manner. The self-denying prophecy therefore implies that the elites of diametrically opposed groups in a deeply divided society do not give in to conflictual behaviour but demonstrate 'prudent leadership' instead (Lijphart, 1975, p. 75). Because of this prudent attitude, elites "appealed to the contending parties to accommodate their differences, and to put the necessity of achieving a solution ahead of ideological principles and antagonisms" (Lijphart, 1975, p. 110).

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In order for such an elite attitude to come about, Lijphart stresses the importance of including all societal subgroups in political institutions. In fact, contrary to Anglo-Saxon traditions that advocate moderation through alternation in power, Lijphart posits that accommodation and exclusion cannot peacefully coexist. "Divided societies," he argues (1981a, pp. 3-4), "need a democratic regime which emphasizes consensus instead of opposition and which includes rather than excludes all the disparate components."

This form of conflict regulation through power sharing and prudent leadership is what constitutes the core of the consociational democracy (O'Flynn, 2007). In order to bring about this 'spirit of accommodation' (Lijphart, 1975), consociationalism relies on five distinct but interrelated devices: two primary institutions – grand coalition and segmental autonomy –, two secondary institutions – proportionality and veto rights – and one cultural assumption – public deference.

Grand coalition lies at the heart of executive power sharing in consociational societies: all significant groups, including minority groups, represented by their respective elites govern the plural or divided society jointly in matters of common concern. This is the first and foremost element. This finding was inspired by Arthur Lewis' *Politics of West Africa* (1965), which argued that the multi-ethnic states of West Africa needed wide and inclusive coalition governments, instead of the winner-takes-all democratic systems inherited from the British and the French. Lijphart explains that such grand coalition can take several forms:

> a grand coalition cabinet in a parliamentary system, a 'grand' council or committee with important advisory functions, or a grand coalition of a president and other top officeholders in a presidential system. (1977, p. 25)

Matters of common concern should thus be dealt with in consensus, but, conversely, for all matters that generate conflict and strife, a high degree of *autonomy for the segments* is provided to run their own internal affairs. Lijphart notes that segmental autonomy is, in fact, "the logical corollary to the grand coalition principle" (1977, p. 41) and, he continues, "on all matters of common interest, decisions should be made by all of the segments together with roughly proportional degrees of influence", but "on all other matters, however, the decisions and their execution can be left to the separate segments".

In such power-sharing and power-separating dynamics, *proportionality* is the basic tool to ensure a fair political representation of all segments, and a fair distribution of public commodities to all segments. It serves two important functions: on the one hand, "it is a method of allocating civil service appointments and scarce financial resources in the form of government subsidies among the different segments" (Lijphart, 1977, p. 38) and, on the other hand, in the decision-making arenas all segments "should be represented proportionally" (Lijphart, 1977, p. 39). All groups should influence a decision in proportion to their numerical strengths and this "can usually only be assured if the decision is bargained over with the participation of all groups" (Steiner, 1971, p. 63).

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On top of this proportional representation, *mutual veto rights* give each group, especially minorities, the guarantee that they will not be outvoted by larger groups or a majority for matters of common interest. As Lijphart contends, "only such a veto can give each segment a complete guarantee of political protection" (1977, pp. 36-37).

In addition to being an elitist and "rigid and formal agreement, based on institutional representation, cooperation and inclusion" (Bieber & Keil, 2009, p. 339), consociationalism also relied on individual citizens' willingness to remain passive for the greater good. Grumbling masses would mean the death blow for the politics of pacification, because they would put pressure on their segmental elites and render any compromise unacceptable (Huyse, 1970, p. 169; Lijphart, 1968a). In fact, it might even be posited that involving citizens, with their different voices and opinions, is likely to further complicate political decision-making in a divided society and therefore impedes the search for consensus and thus the achievement of political stability (O'Leary, 2005, p. 10).

3 The Consociational History of Belgium

The consociationial model outlined above is closely interwoven with Belgian history. Belgium is a country born out of divisions. It became independent in 1830 when it declared independence from The Netherlands, to which it had been united in 1815 after Napoleon's defeat. The willingness to separate from The Netherlands was fuelled by a twofold cleavage: religion – Belgians were predominantly Catholics and not Protestants – and language – Belgian elites spoke French and not Dutch. Paradoxically, however, these two axes of conflict were also going to be divisive cleavages in the newly formed Belgium. On the one hand, although Belgians were predominantly Catholics, they were divided in regard to the role that the Catholic church should play in the state. This division grew into the church-state cleavage, where some Belgians believed that the church should play an active role in organizing the state, whereas other Belgians strongly favoured a strict demarcation between state and church. On the other hand, whereas Belgian elites spoke French, the majority of the population spoke Dutch. The very slow recognition of Dutch as an official language led to a deep centre-periphery cleavage. On top of these two cleavages, the rather rapid process of industrialization in Belgium yielded a deep socio-economic cleavage.

Belgium's modern history is thus intricately intertwined with consociational democracy as it developed as an answer to these cleavages. Indeed, consociationalism developed in the first half of the twentieth century as a response to the church-state cleavage and the socio-economic cleavage that divided Belgium into three pillars made up of Christian democrats, socialists and liberals. The weight of these three groups on Belgian society can be neatly seen in Figure 1, which shows the vote share of these traditional parties since 1900. During the first half of the twentieth century, the political parties that were at the core of Belgian consociationalism won over 90% of the voters.

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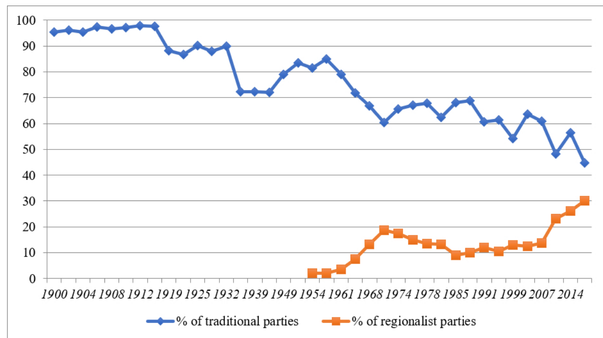

Source: authors' own calculations based on the compilation done by Jérémy Dodeigne and Hugues Renard (2018).

Figure 1 ***Vote share of the traditional (Christian-Democratic, Socialist and Liberal) and regionalist (Dutch-speaking and French-speaking) parties (1900-2019)***

During that period, the centre-periphery – i.e. the linguistic – cleavage was contained because the elites of the pillars shared the same language, French. These religious and economic cleavages were, however, pacified by the 1960s, at which time the linguistic cleavage started to shake the equilibrium within each pillar. This paved the path for political parties outside of the traditional parties to gain electoral strength – because of their strong stance on the linguistic cleavage – starting from the 1958 elections.

This set in motion a process of federalization of the country from the 1960s onwards, which started with the linguistic division of the political branches of each of the three pillars. Belgium incrementally developed consociational federalism (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015). Indeed, the 1970 state reform constitutionally anchored mutual veto rights of the two main linguistic groups as guiding principles for interblock negotiations through special majority laws requiring a majority in both linguistic groups, linguistic parity in the council of ministers and an alarm bell procedure in case one community feels threatened by a law proposal (Reuchamps, 2007, 2008). This new constitution made it virtually impossible for the Dutch-speaking demographic majority to impose its will on the French-speaking segment. As argued by Kris Deschouwer, its importance in persuading the elites of the subgroups to sit together and resolve the matters at hand can hardly be overestimated (Deschouwer, 2006, p. 902). In fact, the new decision-making rules forced leaders to exhibit prudent leadership when accommodating intersegmental conflicts. In other words, as Olivier Costa and Paul Magnette explain,

> the consociative matrix, originating in the religious conflicts, shaped the subsequent political and institutional arrangements, and influenced the modes of negotiations and compromises between the elites, so typical of a multinational society. (Costa & Magnette, 2003, p. 5)

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We thus find at the core of the Belgian political dynamics the four institutional – grand coalition, proportionality, mutual veto rights and segmental autonomy – and one cultural – public passivity – characteristics of consociationalism. The evolution of consociationalism in Belgium can be witnessed through a longer-term indicator shown in Figure 1: the monopoly of the three traditional parties in the first half of the twentieth century and the steady decrease in their vote in the second half of the century, with a historical low of 44.86%, in 2019, whereas the regionalist parties gained more than 30% of the votes. The consociational model relies heavily on voters' loyalty to their own pillar, but as Figure 1 shows, allegiance to one's own segment and associated party has decreased significantly since the 1960s, while support for regionalist parties has grown continuously. This raises the question of whether consociationalism will survive or not in Belgium.

4 Consociational Democracy in Belgium, 50 Years After the 'Politics of Accommodation'

Belgian society and politics have undergone fundamental transformations in recent decades. Depillarization, deep governmental crises, a widening gap between citizens and elites and calls for democratic renewal all underscore the need to take stock of consociationalism's current applicability to Belgian politics. Moreover, consociationalism itself went through an important metamorphosis: from a 'classic' type based on the ideological pillars to a 'federal' type based on the territorial divide. Because of this transformation, Olivier Costa and Paul Magnette (2003) have witnessed a key change in the political dynamics: in consociational federalism the segments are multiparty systems with competition inside the segments, while in the classic consociation the pillars each have a monopoly over their own segment. It arguably modifies thoroughly the dynamics of the competition and hence also the principles at the core of consociationalism. In the following paragraphs, we will assess the extent to which the principles of consociational democracy still guide Belgian politics and the way in which they have come under increasing pressure. We will therefore subsequently discuss the institutional (grand coalition, proportionality, veto rights and segmental autonomy) and cultural characteristics (citizen deference) of consociational democracy.

4.1 Grand Coalition

Lijphart describes consociational democracy primarily as "government by elite cartel designed to turn a democracy with a fragmented political culture into a stable democracy" (Lijphart, 1975, p. 79). The cartel element is of crucial importance for understanding the essence of consociational democracy. The elites essentially divide the market between them along segmental lines: the internal affairs are dealt with by segmental organizations, whereas issues of intersegmental interest are decided in mutual agreement (Huyse, 1970, p. 172).

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Moreover, the fact that the cartel is supposed to be a *grand* coalition is a further indication of its importance. Divided societies require more than minimal winning coalitions (Lijphart, 1984), which indicates that the inclusion of all significant parties and broad intersegmental consensus is required. The inclusion of all significant parties thus necessitates decision-making rules that are more demanding than simple majorities and approach unanimity (Deschouwer, 2006).

Ever since the 1950s, Belgian politics reads as a textbook case of 'government by elite cartel'. Belgium has always had a tradition of forming oversized coalitions. Especially at times when ethnolinguistic tensions flared up, elites systematically sought refuge in oversized coalitions. The requirement of forming a grand coalition was even embedded in the constitutional change of 1970, which stipulated that the federal government has to be composed of an equal number of Dutch and French speakers and which also stipulated that any constitutional change had to be approved by a two-thirds overall majority and a simple majority within each language group. In a 'federal' type of consociationalism, it therefore means that not one but two such *grand* coalitions are needed, i.e. one within each language group.

Table 1 lists all coalitions since 1979, when the three traditional parties had all separated into regional branches. Even though most government coalitions did not achieve a two-thirds majority, most of them did consist of a simple majority within each linguistic group, and most of them were oversized in the sense that more parties were involved in government that numerically necessary. From 1970 to the 2007 election, all government coalitions (except for one, namely Martens V) were composed of a majority in each linguistic group. However, the 2007 election introduced a time of political instability, after which most governments did not achieve a simple majority in one of the language groups. The current Michel II government is even a minority government on both sides of the linguistic divide. This shows that the consociational principle of a governing by elite cartel in large, oversized coalitions, which has been a leading principle in Belgian politics since the 1950s, has been under increasing pressure in the last decade. Even when ethnolinguistic tensions rose after the 2007 and 2010 elections, the elites did not resort (or could not resort) to a grand coalition including a majority among both linguistic groups.

We should be careful when extrapolating tendencies about the viability of consociationalism in Belgium based on the experience of the last ten years, but the fact remains that the last seven governments did not have a majority among the Dutch- or French-speaking language groups in the Chamber of Representatives, and, what is more, the governments are increasingly less congruent both vertically and horizontally, which also influences the political stability (Swenden, 2002). As Table 1 clearly indicates, this demarcates a new period in Belgian politics when grand, inclusive coalitions that gather support from a parliamentary majority on both sides of the linguistic divide seem to be difficult to form.

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Table 1 *Grand coalitions since 1979*

Government	Start Year	Parties in Government	# Seats Total in the Chamber	% of Parliamentary Seats in the Chamber	2/3 Overall Majority in the Chamber	Majority Dutch Speakers in the Chamber	Majority French Speakers in the Chamber	Duration (in days)
Michel II	2018	CD&V; MR; Open VLD	52	34.67	No	**No**	**No**	323
Michel I	2014	N-VA; CD&V; MR; Open VLD	83	55.33	No	Yes	**No**	1520
Di Rupo	2011	PS; sp.a; MR; Open VLD; CD&V; cdH	94	62.67	No	**No**	Yes	1040
Leterme II	2009	PS; CD&V; cdH; Open VLD; MR	94	62.67	No	**No**	Yes	741
Van Rompuy	2008	PS; CD&V; cdH; Open VLD; MR	94	62.67	No	**No**	Yes	330
Leterme I	2008	PS; CD&V; cdH; Open VLD; MR	94	62.67	No	**No**	Yes	285
Verhofstadt III	2007	PS; CD&V; cdH; Open VLD; MR	94	62.67	No	**No**	Yes	90
Verhofstadt II	2003	VLD; MR; PS; spa.-spirit	97	64.67	No	Yes	Yes	1624
Verhofstadt I	1999	VLD; PRL; SP; PS; Agalev; Ecolo	94	62.67	No	Yes	Yes	1460
Dehaene II	1995	CVP; PSC; PS; SP	82	54.67	No	Yes	Yes	1480
Dehaene I	1992	CVP; PSC; PS; SP	120	56.60	No	Yes	Yes	1203
Martens IX	1991	CVP; PSC; PS; SP	133	62.74	No	Yes	Yes	160

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Table 1 (Continued)

Government	Start Year	Parties in Government	# Seats Total in the Chamber	% of Parliamentary Seats in the Chamber	2/3 Overall Majority in the Chamber	Majority Dutch Speakers in the Chamber	Majority French Speakers in the Chamber	Duration (in days)
Martens VIII	1988	CVP; PSC; PS; SP; VU	150	70.75	Yes	Yes	Yes	1238
Martens VII	1987	CVP; PSC; PVV; PRL	115	54.25	No	Yes	Yes	201
Martens VI	1985	CVP; PSC; PVV; PRL	115	54.25	No	Yes	Yes	692
Martens V	1981	CVP; PSC; PVV; PRL	113	53.30	No	Yes	**No**	1442
M. Eyskens	1981	CVP; PSC; PS; SP	140	66.04	Yes	Yes	Yes	255
Martens IV	1980	CVP; PSC; PS; SP	140	66.04	Yes	Yes	Yes	166
Martens III	1980	CVP; PSC; PS; SP; PVV; PRL	177	83.49	Yes	Yes	Yes	157
Martens II	1980	CVP; PSC; PS; SP	140	66.04	Yes	Yes	Yes	116
Martens I	1979	CVP; PSC; PS; SP; FDF	155	73.11	Yes	Yes	Yes	295

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4.2 Proportionality

The political practice of inclusion of all segments in the governmental coalition should also be supported by the proportional representation of the segments. A proportional electoral system is one of the most important institutions through which inclusion can be stimulated. The low threshold for being formally represented is a first, yet crucial, step towards inclusion in the grand coalition because "all groups influence a decision in proportion to their numerical strength" (Steiner, 1971, p. 63). In this sense proportionality complements the grand coalition institution: not only should every segment be represented in government, but each party's governmental strength should be proportional to its numerical strength (Huyse, 1970, p. 153; Lijphart, 1977, p. 39).

Despite its electoral connotation, proportionality has to be interpreted in a much more fundamental way. It is the basic allocative mechanism in government, a simple procedural device capable of redistributing government resources among all societal segments, and thereby defusing social antagonism (Huyse, 1970, p. 154; Steiner, 1971, p. 63). The impact of proportionality on democratic stability should, therefore, not be underestimated: it is perceived to be an impartial mechanism, the application of which is an effective means of removing potentially explosive issues from the government agenda (Lijphart, 1977, p. 39). Hans Daalder therefore concludes that, with the introduction of proportionality, "the essence of political action has shifted from strife to distribution" (Daalder, 1964, p. 24).

In Belgium, the application of the proportionality rule has been one of the most successful ways of buying off the peace. Especially in the 1970s and 1980s, rewarding the linguistic groups financially for settling conflicts peacefully was a preferred technique (Witte, Craeybeckx, & Meynen, 1997). These arrangements could take the form of a proportional distribution of public subsidies or mandates among the segments, but most of the time they involved the devolution of national competencies to the regional level, with each segment's demands being met to similar extents. Flemish demands for cultural and linguistic recognition were thus coupled to Walloon demands for economic control in a proportional manner (Deschouwer, 2012; Witte et al., 1997).

In Belgian politics, this technique was referred to as 'waffle iron politics', stressing the two-sided distribution of resources. Despite the historical success of the 'waffle iron politics', reaching agreements has become increasingly more difficult in recent years, because the 'waffle dough' has become scarce. After all, years of consociational logrolling through successive state reforms significantly emptied the national level of competencies and financial resources (Deschouwer, 1999, p. 103). What is more, this continuous devolution process was made on purpose. It was indeed a way of answering demands, especially for Flanders, to enjoy more autonomy. During the negotiations that finally led to the sixth state reform, the transfer of children allowances was not initially a demand of the Dutch-speaking negotiators and, in particular, of the Christian-Democrats because it was a component of the federal social security that was deemed to be left intact. But it was eventually decided to (de)federalize them because they rep-

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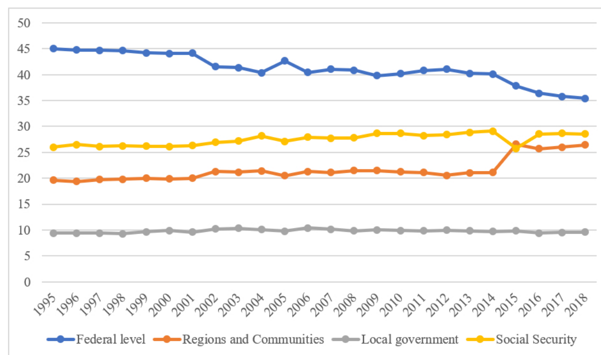

Source: Authors' calculations based on data extracted from the National Bank of Belgium (2019).

Figure 2 ***Share per government level (in %) in total government expenditure (1995-2018)***

resented about one billion euros going from the federal to the substate level. It was deemed necessary to buy off the peace.

The slow but steady process of emptying the federal level can be observed in Figure 2, which shows the historical evolution of the share of each government level in government expenditure. Whereas the federal government still accounted for 44.98% of all government expenditures in 1995, it was down to 35.42% in 2018. Conversely, the overall share of government expenditure by the regional levels has increased significantly. Especially the 6th state reform has shifted the balance between the federal and regional levels (see also Decoster & Sas, 2013). This indicates that less and less financial sweetener is available to seal the consociational deal at the federal level, and as a consequence the package deals that defused conflicts in the past have become increasingly more difficult to negotiate (Huyse, 2003, p. 92), and in all likelihood will continue to be so in the future. In fact, the reduction of financial means at the federal level, further reinforced by the stricter budgetary control by the European Commission, has largely exhausted the usability of proportionality as a consociational technique.

4.3 Mutual Veto Rights

Despite extensive power-sharing guarantees in a grand coalition, some segments might attempt to abuse their majority status. When minorities are outvoted, far-reaching protection mechanisms, in the form of extensive veto rights, are needed to restore the balance and avert systemic disintegration (Lijphart, 1977, p. 36).

Belgium has institutionalized these mutual veto rights in two distinct ways in the 1970 constitution. On the one hand, fundamental changes to the state structure require a double majority: two-thirds of the entire Chamber of Representatives has to approve institutional changes, and an absolute majority of all members within each language group has to give its consent. In particular, the latter

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rule gives each linguistic group the right to block legislation that violates its interests. On the other hand, legislation that requires a mere absolute majority can be stopped by 'ringing' the communitarian alarm bell. At that moment, the parliamentary procedure is halted, and the contentious issue is referred to the government, which has to reach a consensual decision. This de facto gives each linguistic group a veto right as well.

Even though these veto rules have been constitutionally anchored and even though they are intended to ward off majoritarian outbursts, Deschouwer (2006) is correct in pointing out that the consociational threat of minority vetoes has never been a permanent feature of Belgian politics (see also Lorwin, 1966). In practice, we observe time and again the same alternation of majoritarian aggravation followed by consociational appeasement: extended periods of majoritarian decision-making increase ethnolinguistic tensions until the breaking point is reached, and only then the threat of mutual veto rights becomes credible.

The threat of minority vetoes is activated only at moments when the conflict between the groups reaches the boiling point. In this context, Jans claims that the segments will engage in prudent leadership only when non-agreement "entails a broad and generalised blockage of the wider decision-making processes" (Jans, 2001, p. 44). Mutual veto rights are thus activated, and elites resort to conflict accommodation only when the costs of non-agreement become too high. This happens when the policy process at the federal level is completely paralyzed. If this point is reached, the political elites have to focus on the negotiations across the linguistic groups. It also means that no more substantive political decisions can be made in any other policy field. It is thus clear that the political and policy costs of a non-agreement rise steadily as negotiations take longer. The longer the pursuit of the majoritarian logic lasts, the higher the costs and the more the elites are incentivized to reach a compromise (Jans, 2001).

This logic made sense in the period between the 1960s and the 1990s. At that time the federal level was still the dominant political level (Deschouwer, 2002; Reuchamps, 2013c). A general policy paralysis meant that little to no day-to-day policies were actually implemented. However, the Belgian federalization process has rid the federal level of quite a few substantive competencies. The length of the 2010-2011 crisis can be explained partly by the fact that substate governments were still running their respective part of the country, and altogether there was thus no – sense of – general policy paralysis.

As a matter of fact, the cost of a non-agreement rises much slower than before. The policies at the regional level continue to function properly so that a deadlock at the national level does little more than cause a single policy paralysis (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015). The sixth state reform that regionalized fiscal and social security competencies has further hollowed out the federal level (Reuchamps, 2013a). This heightens the chance of non-agreement and explains why it will, in the future, take an increasingly longer time before the mutual veto rights are activated.

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4.4 *Segmental Autonomy*

The final power-sharing institution is the granting of segmental autonomy (Lijphart, 1977, p. 41). Segmental autonomy creates self-rule on issues that impact life within the own subgroup, but at the same time counteracts overarching centrifugal forces by reducing interference from the other groups to the bare minimum. By contrast, in a federal type of consociationalism, granting autonomy also implies that the electoral competition within each segment increases, thereby fostering ethnic outbidding in the long run (Costa & Magnette, 2003).

The Belgian consociational system has relied heavily on the granting of segmental autonomy through the regionalization of federal competencies. Each state reform granted self-rule in contentious areas to the regional levels, and the sixth state reform has even started to defederalize parts of the social security (Deschouwer & Reuchamps, 2013). Such a process of federalization combined with the installation of a power-sharing regime is generally considered a recipe for success (Gurr, 2000, p. 300), but it may also undermine the potential for peaceful conflict resolution in the long term. This is the so-called paradox of federalism. It is arguably claimed that granting autonomy leads to new demands for autonomy, and thus segmental autonomy is not only conflict reducing but also conflict inducing (Erk & Anderson, 2009, p. 32; Nordlinger, 1972). Granting autonomy removes contentious issues from the common agenda, but at the same time sets in motion a self-reinforcing spiral of demands for self-rule, which could lead to separation in the long run (Erk & Anderson, 2009). Federalism allows the substate levels to strengthen their regional identities (Tierney, 2009, p. 246) and also makes it much easier to pass legislation that promotes the development of specific regional cultures and identities (Bunce, 1999; Roeder, 1991). By creating a legitimate basis for the development of regional identities, "federalism [thus] entrenches, perpetuates, and institutionalizes the very divisions it has designed to manage" (Simeon, 1995, p. 257). Moreover, federalism in Belgium, in particular, because it was born out of the death of national political parties, has fostered the incentive structure for regionalist parties (Fournier & Reuchamps, 2009). Indeed, by cementing the electoral fences between the regions and giving no incentive for cross-borders voting, federalism has made it electorally rewarding for these parties to compete as ethnic outbidders. This has increased demands for further autonomy, while at the same time hardening the stance of the regional negotiators at the national level (Reuchamps, 2015).

Surprisingly enough, Belgium has witnessed the embryonic contours of a reversal of the paradox of federalism. Even though the nationalist (N-VA) and radical-right parties (Vlaams Belang) have maintained their stance on the further need for regional autonomy, and even though these parties continue to plead for confederalism or secession, especially in the aftermath of the 2019 elections, some observers have noticed a shift in the discourse of the other parties (Dodeigne, Gramme, Reuchamps, & Sinardet, 2016). The ecologist (Groen and Ecolo),[1] liberal (Open VLD[2] and MR[3]) and socialist (SP.a and PS)[4] parties on both sides of the linguistic divide are increasingly advocating the refederalization of regional competencies because the current distribution of competencies undermines government efficiency (Dodeigne, Reuchamps, & Sinardet, 2015). Even the

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Dutch- and French-speaking Christian-democratic parties (CD&V and CDH), which were historically the main drivers of segmental autonomy, have changed their stance on the refederalization of competencies (Reuchamps, Sinardet, Dodeigne, & Caluwaerts, 2017). After all, CD&V states on its website that "neither regionalization nor refederalization should be a taboo" (CD&V, 2019; translation by the authors), and in 2018 Maxime Prévot, the current president of the French-speaking CDH, stated that "refederalization is eventually a matter of political intelligence, effectiveness and efficiency" (De Tijd, 2018b).

4.5 Public Deference

Besides these four institutional conditions, Lijphart also specifies a cultural one: citizens in divided societies should remain politically deferent (Lijphart, 1968a). Along with Belgian sociologist Luc Huyse (1970), he argued that the consociational model of democracy would work only as long as the citizens remained passive. "Too much political activism at the basis," Huyse (1970, pp. 168, translation by the authors) writes, "leads to harmful limitation of the space within which the elites can maneuver." Citizens should thus not engage in the wider political debate, and certainly not in discussion across divides, because grass-roots involvement would only jeopardize the already fragile balance between the segments. "The central position of the elites", Huyse (1970, pp. 157, translation by the authors) concludes, "[should be] balanced by a third-rate role of the citizen."

Even though this twofold assumption of prudent leadership of the elites and a passive role of the masses in the search for consensus in divided societies has proven to provide political stability (Pappalardo, 1981), it increasingly faces headwinds from two sides. On the one hand, the public deference assumption made sense in the 1960s, when group affiliation was strong and party loyalty high. However, as Figure 3 shows, the levels of electoral volatility have increased steadily and significantly. This renders compromising and prudence less effective as electoral strategies than ethnonationalist outbidding. On the other hand, the idea of a passive citizenry is problematic in light of the steady rise of competing models of democracy. The assumptions of elite decision-making and citizen deference contrast sharply with the call for democratic innovations, which has been sounding ever more loudly since the 1990s (Dryzek, 2000). These democratic innovations rely heavily on increasing levels of citizen participation and deliberation, and thus have the potential to undermine democratic stability in deeply divided societies (O'Flynn & Caluwaerts, 2018). Contrary to Lijphart, who claims that consociationalism is "the only workable type of democracy in deeply divided societies" (Lijphart, 1994, p. 222), deliberative democrats have argued that a more prominent and more participatory role for citizens in a democracy could lead to conflict mitigation even in deeply divided societies (Caluwaerts & Deschouwer, 2014; Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2014a, 2018; Dryzek, 2005).

Belgium – as the textbook case of consociationalism – has traditionally been reluctant to implement more direct forms of democracy (Bouhon & Reuchamps, 2018; Caluwaerts, 2012), and most actors are quite hesitant to move forward in

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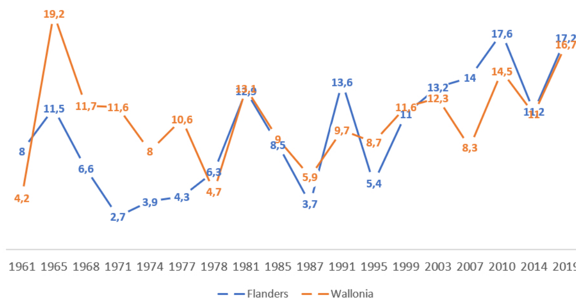

Source: Deschouwer (2012) for all elections between 1961 and 2007; Dassonneville and Baudewyns (2014) for the 2010 and 2014 elections; own calculations based on FOD IBZ (2019) for the 2019 election.

Figure 3 ***Net electoral volatility (Pedersen Index) in Flanders and Wallonia for national/federal elections (1961-2019)***

this direction after the Royal Question in 1950. This referendum about the possible return of the King after WWII, further fuelled the division of the country along linguistic lines and led the country to the brink of a civil war. Even though the issue was resolved in a very consociational and pragmatically Belgian manner, the collective trauma of the Royal Question led to a general fear of direct democracy in Belgium. It took Belgium until 1994 to allow popular consultations, but only at the local and provincial level, and the use of referendums at the national level seems but a distant future possibility (Gaudin, Jacquet, Pilet, & Reuchamps, 2018a, 2018b).

The question should therefore be raised whether this fear for citizen involvement in the politics of divided societies is warranted. Is there – besides the scar caused by the Royal Question – any reason to believe more participatory types of democracy would not work in a deeply divided society? Optimistic voices argue that deliberation can lead to understanding, which in turn can lead to respect. Rather than deepen the divides, citizens in effective deliberative environments might bridge the divides (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2014a, 2018). Deliberation across divides should not necessarily lead to a deepening of mutual distrust and an exacerbation of negative out-group feelings. Rather, contact between members of opposed groups might even lead to a more positive regard for members of the out-group. The hypothesis finds empirical support. Deliberations between Israeli Jews and Palestinians (Ellis & Maoz, 2002, 2007), between French and Dutch speakers in Belgium (Caluwaerts & Deschouwer, 2014; Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2014b), between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland (Luskin, O'Flynn, Fishkin, & Russell, 2014) and between former combatants and war victims in Colombia (Ugarriza & Nussio, 2016, 2017) have shown that discussing political issues with diametrically opposed others fosters greater trust and tolerance for disagreements that may increase the propensity for peaceful conflict resolution (O'Flynn & Caluwaerts, 2018).

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Pessimistic views, on the other side, suggest that dialogue only exacerbates existing conflicts because "deliberation can bring differences to the surface, widening the political divisions rather than narrowing them" (Shapiro, 1999, p. 31), thus making it an undesirable practice in divided contexts societies. For Cass Sunstein, there is a tendency for groups to polarize (Sunstein, 2002), and therefore deliberations are likely to reinforce pre-existing opinions or decisions (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002) as well as prior power relationships (Mendelberg & Karpowitz, 2016). For deliberation in divided societies, this could have particularly negative consequences (Nenkov & Gollwitzer, 2012).

Given this deep disagreement in the academic community, there is a further need to explore the relationship between consociational and deliberative models of democracy, especially in deeply divided Belgium, which is known for its consociational inheritance.

5 Looking Forward: Trouble Ahead?

Even though political scientists are notoriously bad at making predictions, and even though consociational democracy lends itself poorly to future estimations, the analysis presented in this article paints a rather grim picture on the future of consociational democracy in Belgium. Most of the institutional and cultural foundations of consociationalism in Belgium have been hollowed out by the societal, political or economic context.

The 'politics of accommodation' thus seems to be under serious threat. The historical tradition of forming oversized coalitions relying on a majority of parliamentary votes on both sides of the language divide seems to have been abandoned since the 2007 election. The proportionality principle, which was historically very successful in defusing conflicts by buying off the peace has become increasingly problematic given that less financial sweetener is available to peacefully accommodate the linguistic divide. Mutual veto rights are still firmly established and kick in when one language group tries to unilaterally impose its will, but our prediction is that it will take an increasingly long time for veto rights to be activated in the future. Further, the usability of granting segmental autonomy is contested for two reasons – on the one hand, because very few substantive competences remain at the federal level, which means that there is increasingly little autonomy to grant any more, and, on the other hand, granting autonomy risks further propelling the paradox of federalism. We should, however, point out that we find evidence that parties are increasingly supportive of refederalization of competences (Sinardet, Dodeigne, & Reuchamps, 2013; Sinardet, Reuchamps, & Dodeigne, 2014). And, finally, Lijphart's (and Huyse's) claim that democracy could thrive in deeply divided societies only as long as the demos remained deferent is increasingly contested by the rise of deliberative and participatory models of democracy.

Despite the fact that Belgium's consociational foundations seem to have slowly but surely eroded, Belgian politics has demonstrated a great deal of peacefulness in the last couple of years. The Di Rupo and Michel I governments were

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relatively stable, and even the Michel II minority government seems capable of governing, which is a historical anomaly. Of course, nationalist tensions flare up once in a while, and continue to do so in Flanders after the 2019 election, but the ethnolinguistic cleavage in the last two governments played second fiddle to other divisive issues such as migration, the economy and climate change. It might be too soon to suggest that consociationalism has fully accommodated the linguistic division, but survey research has shown time and again that the nationalist cause is more of an elite fault line than an axis of division within the population (Deschouwer, De Winter, Reuchamps, Sinardet, & Dodeigne, 2015; Deschouwer & Sinardet, 2010; Reuchamps, 2013b).

As mentioned earlier in this article, consociational decision-making is not a permanent feature of Belgian politics. This makes it difficult to predict whether consociationalism is making room for other types of democracy or whether the current period of relative political stability is merely the calm before the storm. Nevertheless, we can only conclude that the apparent demise of consociationalism has not fundamentally undermined the recent stability of Belgian politics. What kind of future lies ahead for Belgian democracy one can only guess, but given that nationalist parties obtained more than 40% of the vote in Flanders in the 2019 elections, the next couple of months might be pivotal in determining the enduring impact of consociationalism in Belgium.

Notes

1 On March 11, 2019, the leader of the ecologist parliamentary party group, Kristof Calvo, stated that climate and energy policies should be refederalized (De Morgen, 2019).

2 On May 15, 2019, Open VLD minister Maggie De Block pleaded for the refederalization of parts of the health system (VRT Nieuws 2019), and on 29 July 2018, her colleague Alexander Decroo advocated lifting certain regional competencies back to the federal level (De Tijd, 2018a).

3 In 2018, two federal MR ministers, Sophie Wilmès and François Bellot, and the president of the federal Senate, Christine Defraigne, signed an opinion piece on refederalization (RTBF, 2018).

4 Party President John Crombez stated that policy makers 'should dare to look both ways' when creating homogeneous competencies, thereby implying that refederalization is possible (De Morgen,2018).

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