

# Consociationalism : Theoretical Development Illustrated by the Case of Belgium<sup>1</sup>

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## I. Introduction

Consociationalism and consociational democracy are well-established concepts in the vocabulary of political science. In this article, I will focus on the present status of consociational theory, taking the theoretical approach of Arend Lijphart as my starting point.

Consociational theory has developed in (at least) three senses, all of which I will scrutinise. Firstly, Lijphart has himself ameliorated and adapted his theory to new theoretical interests, empirical changes and as response to critiques. Secondly, the criticism of consociational theory and its empirical applications has been substantial and diverse. Criticism is itself aimed at theoretical development and improvement. Thirdly, elements of consociationalism have been incorporated into other and very different types of political science theories. After having presented Lijphart's definition of consociational democracy and his discussion of conditions favouring such a democracy to develop and sustain itself, I proceed by showing how Lijphart himself has changed theoretical perspective. Thereafter, I elaborate on the main criticisms of consociational theory; of the theoretical logic, concerning the status and relevance of the favourable conditions and of the theory's empirical application. Finally, I show how a synthesis of Lijphart and his critics can be forged by incorporating elements of consociational theory into more actor-oriented approaches. I will in particular consider game theory, the use of consociationalism in crisis management and a political-activist perspective.

This article is first and foremost a theoretical exploration. However, the case of Belgium will be used to illustrate theoretical points and to justify the criticism of Lijphart's empirical applications. Belgium is an interesting case not only because Lijphart refers to it extensively, but also because the recent federalisation process corresponds to some theoretical developments. Nevertheless, the aim of the article is not to make an account of consociational democracy in Belgium, but to discuss consociationalism in theory, point out its weaknesses and show that its explanatory power is conditioned by its incorporation into more actor-oriented theoretical perspectives.

<sup>1</sup> I am heavily indebted to Professor Bart Maddens for the finalising of this article. I am also grateful to the editors and four anonymous reviewers of *Res Publica* who commented on earlier versions.

## II. Consociational democracy : Defining characteristics and favourable conditions

Lijphart's 1977 book on democracy in plural societies<sup>2</sup> does not alone represent the extensive literature on consociational democracies. Other scholars have also been studying the relations of plural societies and accommodation. Neither does the book mark the beginning of Lijphart's own academic exploration of the theme. He had elaborated on consociational democracy a decade earlier<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless, Lijphart's 1977 work stands out as the culmination of the literature on consociationalism. The book has established itself as a classic in comparative political science and will be taken as the point of departure in the following discussion.

Lijphart uses a model of consociationalism to explain why and how a plural society can have a stable democracy and an effective system of government. The model was originally designed to account for the fact that Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands and Switzerland are well-functioning democracies despite their divisions along particularly salient religious, ideological, linguistic, regional, cultural or ethnic segmental cleavages.

Lijphart applies the case of Belgium to illustrate his theory : 'What is remarkable about Belgium is not that it is a culturally divided society – most of the countries in the contemporary world are divided into separate and distinct cultural, religious, or ethnic communities – but that its cultural communities coexist peacefully and democratically. What is more, Belgium can legitimately claim to be the most thorough example of consociational democracy, the type of democracy that is most suitable for deeply divided societies'<sup>4</sup>. Accordingly, the consociational formula can explain why Belgium, despite its plural character, remains a democratic unity.

Consociational democracy is only defined by its four major characteristics<sup>5</sup> :

### A. Grand coalition

The leaders of all significant segments in a plural society co-operate in a grand coalition. The leaders are coalescing. No important, political decision is taken by a simple majority rule. For the system to work, it requires that the political leaders have a moderate attitude and a will to compromise. The grand coalition is typically ensured by a grand coalition cabinet, but the same functions can also be performed by shifting government coalitions, different types of ad hoc grand councils and committees, or by rules of, or *de facto*, separation of powers.

<sup>2</sup> LIJPHART, A., *Democracy in Plural Societies. A Comparative Exploration*, New Haven : Yale University Press, 1977.

<sup>3</sup> See in particular LIJPHART, A., Consociational Democracy, *World Politics*, Vol. 21, 1969(2), p. 207-225.

<sup>4</sup> LIJPHART, A., Introduction : The Belgian Example of Cultural Coexistence in Comparative Perspective, pp. 1-12, p. 1, in LIJPHART, A. (Ed.), *Conflict and Coexistence in Belgium. The Dynamics of a Culturally Divided Society*, Berkeley : Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1981.

<sup>5</sup> LIJPHART, A., *o.c.*, 1977.

*B. Mutual veto*

A mutual veto right gives each segment a guarantee of protection from majority rule. The mutual veto can be informal or laid down in the constitution of the country. This principle implies that special majorities or even unanimity are required in order to take certain very important decisions.

*C. Proportionality*

Civil service posts and financial resources are allocated proportionally to the segments. The segments are also proportionally represented in all decision-making organs. Overrepresentation of the minority, even to the level of parity with the majority, is a kind of extraordinary extension of the proportionality principle that can be used to protect the minority, especially in cases with only two segments. A problem arises in relation to questions that cannot be 'proportionally' answered – the clear-cut yes or no questions. Making package deals where the answers to several questions are combined and dealt with in secret elite negotiations can solve this.

*D. Segmental autonomy and federalism*

This principle ensures that each minority can rule over itself and links federalism to consociationalism. Federalism is a consociational method that is especially applicable in cases where the segmental cleavages coincide with the territorial distribution of the segments. Federalism is thus an implementation of segmental autonomy. A system of non-territorial federalism can be applied wherever the segments are geographically mixed.

The Belgian government is a grand coalition with respect to the linguistic groups (both Dutch- and French-speakers are always included), but not with respect to religious and ideological groupings. Only in exceptional cases have Catholics, Socialists and Liberals all shared governmental responsibilities. Mutual veto is ensured through a measure enabling a three-fourth majority of one of the language groups to suspend the law-making procedure for one month and send the bill back to the government. The Special Law procedure requires extraordinary parliamentary majorities in order to pass bills affecting the Communities and a two-thirds majority is needed in both Houses of Parliament to change the Belgian Constitution. The Parliament is elected according to ordinary PR-rules and the language groups are proportionally represented in the Senate too. Furthermore, a mixed system of territorial (the Regions) and non-territorial (the Communities) federalism<sup>6</sup> has been established in Belgium.

<sup>6</sup> The notion of non-territorial Communities is in fact partly misleading. The principle of non-territoriality does only apply to Brussels. Apart from the bilingual capital, the Dutch-speaking, the French-speaking and the German-speaking Communities are all territorially defined and limited. The concept of non-territoriality is nevertheless widely used because it underlines the difference from a classical federation based on territorial competences.

Consociational democracy requires leaders with a commitment to democracy and, for the sake of institutional stability, to the unity of the country. The leaders must have the willingness to moderation and compromise and at the same time be able to keep their support from the followers. There is no doubt that 'The politics of accommodation places heavy burdens on the political leaders'<sup>7</sup>. The elites have not only managed to reach compromises among themselves, but also to sell the policy outcomes to their respective following groups. The fact that the masses accept the elite negotiated agreements is also a crucial condition for the functioning of a consociational system of governance.

To ensure the predictive power of his model, Lijphart introduces a list of favourable conditions for elite coalescence and thereby consociational democracy to develop. In 1977<sup>8</sup>, Lijphart lists the following favourable conditions :

*a. The balance of power*

A multiple balance of power among the segments is better than a dual balance or hegemony because the former makes domination by one segment as good as impossible. The power should be balanced both with respect to numerical strength, economic power and cultural predominance. Co-operation and especially efficient decision-making gets difficult with too many segments, three or four should be the optimal number. In Belgium 'The two language communities are afraid of being dominated by the other : the French-speaking Belgians fear the numerical superiority of the Flemings, and the Flemings fear and resent the economic and cultural dominance of the French-speaking segment'<sup>9</sup>. According to Val R. Lorwin, this implied a national situation with two oppressed minorities (the Walloons and the Brusselers) and one oppressed majority (the Flemings)<sup>10</sup>.

*b. Multiparty systems*

It is a favourable condition if a political party represents each segment. This makes formal negotiations easier and the party leaders will have legitimacy to negotiate and act on behalf of the segments. In Belgium, the Christian-Democratic, the Socialist and the Liberal parties represent the three old pillars. The linguistic segments are represented by specific parties, but also by the regional Christian-Democratic, Socialist, Liberal and Green parties. There can thus be no doubt about the multiparty character of the Belgian polity.

<sup>7</sup> LIJPHART, A., *The Politics of Accommodation : Pluralism and Democracy in the Netherlands*, Berkeley : University of California Press, 1968, p. 122.

<sup>8</sup> LIJPHART, A., *o.c.*, 1977.

<sup>9</sup> LIJPHART, A., *o.c.*, 1977, p.61.

<sup>10</sup> LORWIN, V.R., *Belgium : Religion, Class, and Language in National Politics*, pp. 147-187, in DAHL, R.A. (Ed.), *Political Opposition in Western Democracies*, New Haven : Yale University Press, 1966.

*c. Small size of the country*

In a small country the elites know each other personally and will therefore seek compromises. Political actors in small countries often have a feeling of vulnerability on behalf of their country with respect to big power neighbours, and, in the case that the external threat is perceived as a danger by all the segments, this feeling creates internal solidarity. In addition, the decision load is low because of less complexity in politics and fewer foreign policy engagements. Belgium is small and weak compared to most of its neighbours. The perception of being small and vulnerable has produced a certain sense of internal solidarity and cohesion and can have subdued the internal forces of disintegration and fragmentation<sup>11</sup>.

*d. Crosscutting cleavages*

Crosscutting of conflicts can provide for moderate attitudes and actions. Different segmental alliances can develop, depending upon the issue matter at stake. With strong crosscutting cleavages and alliances a clear-cut split into two sides is hampered. Lijphart argues that the language cleavage cuts across both religion and class in Belgium. This means that in religious or social issues, religious groups or class representatives can work together across the language border.

*e. Overarching loyalties*

Overarching loyalties moderate all conflicts. This means that it is 'helpful for consociationalism if the divisions among the segments are counterbalanced to some extent by an overarching sense of belonging together'<sup>12</sup>. Such a feeling of belonging together produces cohesion both within the different segments and, through the ideology of statewide nationalism, in the country as a whole. Most Belgians, both in Flanders and in Wallonia, identify more with Belgium than with their respective Regions<sup>13</sup>.

*f. Representative party system*

The political parties should represent all major social cleavages such as religion, class and language, so that efforts to compromise are automatically institutionalised. Since World War II, the party system in Belgium has changed to include the

<sup>11</sup> ROKKAN, S., *Citizens, elections, parties. Approaches to the comparative study of processes of development*, Oslo : Universitetsforlaget, 1970.

<sup>12</sup> LIJPHART, A., *Power-Sharing in South Africa*, Berkeley : Institute of International Studies, University of California : 1985, p. 124.

<sup>13</sup> 51,9 % of the Flemings identified first and foremost with Belgium in 1995. Only 24,7 % identified primarily with Flanders. In Wallonia, 65,1 % identified with Belgium and only 18,0 % with Wallonia. 73,3 % of the respondents in Flanders say that they feel just as Belgian as Flemish, more Belgian than Flemish or only Belgian. The equivalent result for Wallonia was 88,0 %. Only 3,6 % claim to be exclusively Flemish and 1,9 % to be exclusively Walloon. Data based on ISPO-PIOP polls presented in MADDENS, B., BILLIET, J., BEERTEN, R., *De (sub)nationale identiteit en de houding tegenover vreemdelingen in Vlaanderen en Wallonië*, pp.298-313, in DEPREZ, K., VOS, L. (Eds.), *Nationalisme in België. Identiteiten in beweging 1780-2000*, Antwerp : Houtekiet, 1999.

linguistic cleavage<sup>14</sup>. Today there is a high degree of compatibility between the political cleavages and the party system.

*g. Segmental isolation and federalism*

To actively isolate the different segments is a method of consociational democracy, whereas the given of geographically isolated segments is a favourable condition. By segmental isolation the segments are kept away from each other and thus are direct and frequent confrontation, conflict and violence avoided. Federalism is simply a territorial and judicial-political expression of segmental autonomy. Federalism is favourable to elite coalescence because it can increase the homogeneity of the federal units as compared with the country as a whole and provide new political arenas for the possible solution of sensitive issues. There can be no doubt about the federal character of Belgium, and the Constitution has since 1993 recognised this by simply stating that Belgium is a federal state.

*h. Traditions of elite accommodation*

A long tradition of political moderation, compromises and territorially dispersed power can inspire the present segmental leaders to seek moderation and co-operation as well. In Belgium, the most important in this respect is the development of the pillarised society, starting with the 1918 Pact of Loppem to introduce universal male suffrage. For decade after decade, the pillar elites agreed on policy compromises and thereby they established a very strong tradition of elite accommodation.

Despite his long discussion of favourable conditions, Lijphart underlines the voluntary aspect of consociational democracy. Consociationalism can freely and deliberately be created and followed by the leaders of a plural society. This implies that consociationalism can work by elite efforts despite the lack of favourable conditions, but also that the favourable conditions are not sufficient to ensure consociationalism in cases where elite coalescence is absent. The elites should therefore be a group of consociational engineers wishing to establish and maintain democracy and act according to what this aim requires. Moreover, even a model example of consociational democracy is neither necessary nor sufficient for the stability of a democratic regime. Lijphart admits thus that consociational structures alone cannot guarantee peace and unity in a random country. This is precisely why he stresses the importance of the favourable conditions. A country with a consociational constitution, but where none of the favourable conditions are present is not likely to escape deterioration. Consociational democracies are thus not successful by luck, but because the existence of the favourable conditions gives stability to the consociational structures.

<sup>14</sup> For a thorough elaboration on the changes in the Belgian party system, see DEWACHTER, W., *Changes in a Particratie: The Belgian Party System from 1944 to 1986*, pp. 285-363, in DAALDER, H. (Ed.), *Party Systems in Denmark, Austria, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Belgium*, London: Frances Pinter, 1987.

**Table 1. MATRIX SUMMARISING FAVOURABLE CONDITIONS AND MODEL ELEMENTS IN SELECTED LIJPHART VOLUMES**  
(Years corresponding to Lijphart volumes cited in the main text)

1977	1985	1981	1984	1999
Favorable conditions for consociational democracy	Favorable conditions for consociational democracy	Characteristics of consociational model of democracy	Elements of consensus model of democracy	Elements of consensus model of democracy
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The balance of power</li> <li>2. Multiparty system</li> <li>3. Small size of the country</li> <li>4. Crosscutting cleavages</li> <li>5. Overarching loyalties</li> <li>6. Representative party system</li> <li>7. Segmental isolation and federalism</li> <li>8. Traditions of elite accommodation</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. No majority segment</li> <li>2. Segments of equal size</li> <li>3. Small number of segments</li> <li>4. Small population size</li> <li>5. External threats</li> <li>6. Overarching loyalties</li> <li>7. Socio-economic equality</li> <li>8. Geographical concentration of segments</li> <li>9. Traditions of accommodation</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Executive power-sharing: grand coalitions</li> <li>2. Balanced executive-legislative relations and semi-separations of powers</li> <li>3. Balanced bicameralism and minority representation</li> <li>4. Multiparty system</li> <li>5. Multidimensional character of the party system</li> <li>6. Proportional representation</li> <li>7. Territorial and non-territorial "federalism" and decentralization</li> <li>8. Minority veto</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Executive power-sharing: grand coalitions</li> <li>2. Separation of powers, formal and informal</li> <li>3. Balanced bicameralism and minority representation</li> <li>4. Multiparty system</li> <li>5. Multidimensional party system</li> <li>6. Proportional representation</li> <li>7. Territorial and non-territorial federalism and decentralization</li> <li>8. Written constitution and minority veto</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Executive power-sharing in broad coalition cabinets</li> <li>2. Executive-legislative balance of power</li> <li>3. Multiparty system</li> <li>4. Proportional representation</li> <li>5. Interest group corporatism</li> <li>6. Federal and decentralized government</li> <li>7. Strong bicameralism</li> <li>8. Constitutional rigidity</li> <li>9. Judicial review</li> <li>10. Central bank independence</li> </ol>

### III. Development in Lijphart's writings

Lijphart's 1977 publication<sup>15</sup> inspired a large scale scholarly debate on consociationalism. Other scholars have used the concepts of Lijphart in various studies and Lijphart has himself adapted and developed his theory and his concepts to new ideas, empirical evidence and critiques. First, we consider the development in Lijphart's own writings.

One point of interest is the theoretical relationship between consociationalism and federalism. Although there are clear theoretical and empirical links between the two, it is crucial for Lijphart to prove that a consociation is something more than a federation<sup>16</sup>. A federation is only consociational when it is democratic, when the society is plural, when all the principles of consociational democracy (grand coalition, mutual veto, proportionality and segmental isolation) are applied, when the federation is decentralised, when the boundaries of the federal state increase the segmental homogeneity of territorial units and when the federation is made up of many and small component units. Thus consociation and federation can combine, but non-federal consociations and non-consociational federations can also exist.

In 1985, Lijphart undertakes a major review of the favourable conditions for consociational democracy, basically to prove that consociationalism is a realistic option for a democratic South Africa<sup>17</sup>. Lijphart now lists nine favourable conditions, all of which are recognisable from the earlier listing, though conditions linked to the party system and to the pattern of political cleavages are now left out. For the exact listings of favourable conditions and elements of consociational and consensus models of democracy in various Lijphart volumes, see Table 1. Significantly, the 1985 list of favourable conditions does not correspond very well to the empirical situation in Belgium. Due to its majority segment and lack of strong overarching loyalties, Belgium does not score any better than South Africa, i.e. the conditions for consociational democracy is no better in Belgium than in South Africa. This result explains Lijphart's optimism on behalf of South Africa, but can indeed just as well provide for pessimism on behalf of Belgium !

Still, Lijphart maintains that Belgium is *the* model consociation. In 1981, Belgium was described as an almost perfect example of the consociational ideal, fulfilling eight characteristics of consociational democracy<sup>18</sup>. This listing of consociational characteristics resembles listings of favourable conditions, but is now presented to define consociational democracy (as opposed to the British system of majoritarian democracy).

<sup>15</sup> LIJPHART, A., *o.c.*, 1977.

<sup>16</sup> LIJPHART, A., Consociation and Federation : Conceptual and Empirical Links, *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 12, 1979 (3), p. 499-515.

<sup>17</sup> LIJPHART, A., *o.c.*, 1985.

<sup>18</sup> LIJPHART, A., *o.c.*, 1981.



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Perhaps is it this confusion of defining elements and helpful conditions that explains Lijphart's change of theoretical concept in a major publication from 1984<sup>19</sup>. The same eight characteristics are listed, although with some denominational changes, but now as elements of a *consensus* model of democracy. The shift from consociational to consensus is convenient because the latter is 'shorter – and easier to pronounce !'<sup>20</sup>, but does also signify an alternation of theoretical approach. Consensus democracy is one of two basic models of democracy and is derived as the logical opposite of the majoritarian model. The main point is no longer to explain why divided societies do not split, but to examine the political structures of these societies. The model of consociational democracy was developed to explain exceptions in democratic theory, i.e. to show how democracy can work despite societal divisions. The consensus model of democracy describes an ideal-type of democracy. Many of the factors studied are the same, but the theoretical perspective is new.

Recently, Lijphart has added new characteristics to his consensus model<sup>21</sup>. Belgium still serves as a good empirical example, 'especially after it formally became a federal state in 1993'<sup>22</sup>. The essentially new characteristics are interest group corporatism, judicial review and central bank independence. They are all believed to work against a dictatorship of the majority. Lijphart finds that the general elements of corporatism are present in Belgium. The really powerful interest groups are privileged, few and large and have a profound impact on social policy. The Court of Arbitration can be regarded as a real constitutional court with the right to review all kinds of legislation and the Belgian central bank has been increasing its political autonomy.

There has always been a normative element in Lijphart's writings. He argued that consociational devices should be adopted in South Africa<sup>23</sup> and claims that consensus democracy can improve macroeconomic performance and the control of violence and moreover that there are strong correlations between consensus democracy and democratic quality<sup>24</sup>.

Lijphart has developed, adapted and expanded his own theory during the last decades in order to respond to empirical evolution and new theoretical interests. However, he has stuck to a certain framework of theoretical conceptions and empirical examples that have not escaped profound criticism.

<sup>19</sup> LIJPHART, A., *Democracies. Patterns of Majoritarian and Consensus Government in Twenty-One Countries*, New Haven : Yale University Press, 1984.

<sup>20</sup> LIJPHART A., *o.c.*, 1984, xiv.

<sup>21</sup> LIJPHART, A., *Patterns of Democracy. Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*, New Haven : Yale University Press, 1999.

<sup>22</sup> LIJPHART, A., *o.c.*, 1999, 33.

<sup>23</sup> LIJPHART, A., *o.c.*, 1985.

<sup>24</sup> LIJPHART, A., *o.c.*, 1985.

#### IV. Critique of Lijphart

Lijphart himself identifies six categories of criticism of consociational theory<sup>25</sup>. He summarises these as : A. Consociationalism does not lead to peace and democracy in plural societies; B. Majoritarianism does not lead to violence and democratic failure; C. Consociationalism causes plurality; D. Consociationalism is not democratic; E. The ideal of consociationalism is not found in reality; F. Criticism directed against the favourable conditions. I will proceed less selectively and consider criticism of three general types; against the logic of consociational theory, concerning the status and application of the favourable conditions, and against the application of consociational theory to the empirical example of Belgium.

##### A. Critique of Lijphart's general theory

The consociational model should not be seen as some kind of a magic formula to contain societal divisions, to manage nationalism or to make federalism work. Lijphart is himself pointing at some disadvantages<sup>26</sup>. Federalism might lead to secession, but as a last resort Lijphart is willing to pay the price of secession if it helps avoiding an outright civil war. Consociational democracy may provide less liberty or equality to the individual citizen and does not create any kind of fraternity between the segments. Other potential problems with consociationalism are that the grand coalitions can slow down the decision-making process, that the mutual veto can immobilise the complete political system, the proportional allocation of civil service posts can lead to administrative inefficiency and the segmental autonomy can easily turn out to be an expensive way of governance. Another democratic problem is the fact that the election results not necessarily nor automatically inflict upon the composition of the grand coalition government. This can provoke people to vote for anti-regime or protest parties. Nevertheless, Lijphart maintains that consociational democracy is the best realistic kind of democracy (or indeed the only democracy possible) in a divided society. Later, he is outright rejecting any assumption that consociational democracy is not sufficiently democratic : 'There is nothing in consociationalism that true democrats have to be ashamed of. It is fully democratic – to the extent that any real-world democracy can approximate the democratic ideal'<sup>27</sup>.

In a fundamental critique of Lijphart's model, Adriano Pappalardo questions both theoretical and empirical applications<sup>28</sup>. He has several theoretical objections. He finds a fault in Lijphart's logic due to the fact that elite behaviour in the past explains the nature of both present and future political regimes. Such an argument lacks a causal connection. Actually, it remains blurred what is cause and what is effect in Lijphart's model. It seems as the favourable conditions cause elite

<sup>25</sup> LIJPHART, A., *o.c.*, 1985.

<sup>26</sup> LIJPHART, A., *o.c.*, 1977.

<sup>27</sup> LIJPHART, A., *o.c.*, 1985, 109.

<sup>28</sup> PAPPALARDO, A., The Conditions for Consociational Democracy : a Logical and Empirical Critique, *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 9, 1981 (4), p. 356-390.

behaviour, but this may logically speaking just as well be the other way around. In any case, the model includes a theoretical flaw since no direct explanation is provided for how or why a consociational democracy develops.

Donald L. Horowitz points at the complete lack of any mechanism to ensure 'good' elite behaviour. Horowitz states that 'there is no reason to think automatically that elites will use their leadership position to reduce rather than pursue conflict'<sup>29</sup>. The elites have no theoretically given incentives to seek intergroup accommodation, even where this has traditionally been the case, and Horowitz refuses to believe that politicians are only motivated by a notion of the common good. Horowitz is also afraid that granting of cultural autonomy and specific group rights only strengthens ethnic divisions and thereby increases the conflict. Central in Horowitz' approach are incentives for the politicians to act in a moderate way. Lasting and effective democratic arrangements are better ensured by internal incentives than by consociational external constraints.

To Lijphart, consociationalism was never meant to guarantee peace and democracy in a plural society. His theory is fundamentally probabilistic and not supposed to present absolute explanations<sup>30</sup>. However, the major problem, consisting of the fact that the working of Lijphart's consociational model seems to depend on the good will of the political actors, remains unattained.

#### *B. Favourable conditions*

Criticism concerning the favourable conditions goes to the heart of Lijphart's reasoning and deserves special attention. Important objections to Lijphart's model has been put forward by Matthijs Bogaards<sup>31</sup>. The main point of his critique concerns the ambiguity in Lijphart's model with respect to voluntarism and determinism. This is also partly reflected in Pappalardo's discussion of the causes and effects. It is not made explicit in Lijphart's model whether a consociational democratic system is a result of the choices made by political elites or a product of historical or socio-economic determinants, i.e. favourable conditions. Lijphart defends his approach by arguing that the favourable conditions never were supposed to be seen as absolute prerequisites, but merely as helpful circumstances<sup>32</sup>. A consociational system can therefore, by elite efforts, work irrespective of the existence of favourable conditions. To escape Lijphart's ambiguity, Bogaards suggests 'an elite centred approach to explain and predict the choices made by political elites, especially in the context of plural societies'<sup>33</sup>. The favourable conditions are thus important only insofar as they affect the political choices of the elites.

<sup>29</sup> HOROWITZ, D.L., *A Democratic South Africa ? Constitutional Engineering in a Divided Society*, Berkeley : University of California Press : 1991, p. 141.

<sup>30</sup> LIJPHART, A., *o.c.*, 1985.

<sup>31</sup> BOGAARDS, M., The favourable factors for consociational democracy : A review, *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 33, 1998 (4), p. 475-496.

<sup>32</sup> LIJPHART, A., *o.c.*, 1985.

<sup>33</sup> BOGAARDS, M., *o.c.*, 1998, 492.

Bogaards points to the considerable changes of favourable conditions from one publication by Lijphart to another and sees this as a lack of theoretical coherence. Only a few factors are regarded as favourable in all of Lijphart's works. Bogaards argues that other factors can be added as well. He also underlines other problems. The favourable conditions do not explain why elite behaviour can change. The conditions can be altered through political engineering and the relationship between factors influencing the establishment and factors influencing the maintenance of consociational democracy is not discussed by Lijphart. Bogaards also criticises Lijphart's attempt at quantifying the favourable conditions<sup>34</sup> since he thereby assumes that they are all of equal importance, something that is not at all evident.

Pappalardo criticises the specific favourable conditions listed by Lijphart<sup>35</sup>. His first argument concerns the multiple balance of power and the multiparty system. Where a large number of parties want to push their views in a process of negotiation, the political brokering will tend to be chaotic and an agreement difficult to reach. Pappalardo argues that a multiparty system in this respect has a negative effect on consociational decision-making. Furthermore, he is unable to find any empirical evidence indicating that a multiple balance of power situation or a multiparty system promotes elite moderation and accommodation more than it favours elite extremism. Instead Pappalardo underlines the importance of the stability of the segments. He states: 'consociational democracy is not so much a pact among minorities in equilibrium or minorities *tout court*, as a pact among minorities who do not want and are not in a position to change the existing distribution of power' and 'consociationalism owes much to an electoral behaviour which is a predictable consequence of the 'inflexible' cleavages in segmented systems'<sup>36</sup>. Briefly, this means 'Consociationalism is most likely to work if the segments (...) do not change in size and importance relatively to one another'<sup>37</sup>. This is because a declining segment will be afraid of losing its important position and may thus cease to co-operate.

Pappalardo rejects Lijphart's assumption that the small size of a country or external threats is favourable to consociationalism. Pappalardo argues that 'external threats are not necessarily a catalyst of internal solidarity, but can also prove to be counter-productive'<sup>38</sup>. Lijphart's assumption is also weakened by the fact that 'there is at least one example of a large countries (Canada) which operates moderately successfully on consociational principles, and small countries (Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, Fiji) failing to do so'<sup>39</sup>. When it comes to cleavage structure, Pappalardo points out that even though cleavages may be crosscutting they are never equally salient. The most salient cleavage will always remain a source of conflict.

<sup>34</sup> LIJPHART, A., *o.c.*, 1985.

<sup>35</sup> PAPPALARDO, A., *o.c.*, 1981.

<sup>36</sup> PAPPALARDO, A., *o.c.*, 1981, 369.

<sup>37</sup> KELLAS, J.G., *The Politics of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1988, p. 181.

<sup>38</sup> PAPPALARDO, A., *o.c.*, 1981, 376.

<sup>39</sup> KELLAS, J.G., *o.c.*, 1988, 183.

Crosscutting cleavages do therefore not in their own force create moderation and accommodation. Pappalardo does even argue that crosscutting cleavages can be a direct obstacle to consociation because 'Crosscutting divisions logically work in favour of segments which are barely homogenous, cohesive and organized, and which are governed by weakly representative élites'<sup>40</sup>. Furthermore, he sees no direct causal link between an overarching national sentiment and the possibility of conflict resolution.

Pappalardo has three main objections against Lijphart's idea of segmental isolation. Firstly, segmental isolation does not solve the conflict. The conflict is simply maintained. Secondly, the lack of contacts between individuals and groups across the segmental cleavage do not provide any possibility for mutual understanding. All knowledge of the other segment is thus based on stereotypical notions. Segmental isolation does not imply conflict regulation and does not provide the segments any reason to stay together. It can be argued that the highly consociational system of segmental autonomy and isolation in Lebanon could not only not prevent the Lebanese civil war starting in 1975, but can to some extent even explain the outbreak of war. Since the political life was completely based on sectarianism, i.e. segmental isolation, substance was provided to the centrifugal forces of the confessional constituencies<sup>41</sup>. Finally, Pappalardo argues that starting a process of federalisation tends to initiate further demands for autonomy. This is how he sees the development in Belgium after 1970.

Lijphart does not give any reasons or explanation to why elites will not deviate from a tradition of accommodation if and when it suits them. Pappalardo concludes his critique of Lijphart's favourable conditions by arguing that the only clearly favourable conditions for a consociational democracy are 'stability among subcultures, and élite predominance over a deferential and organizationally encapsulated following'<sup>42</sup>. Lijphart's response is to underline that the favourable conditions neither are necessary nor sufficient for consociational democracy, and that 'even if most or all of the favourable factors are lacking, it is still possible to have a successful consociation'<sup>43</sup>. But this leaves the question of the real status of the favourable conditions within the theory open, and eventually confirms the doubt to whether the favourable conditions are either favourable to, or conditions for, consociational democracy. Thus, the favourable conditions may influence some factors of, but cannot explain consociational democracy.

### C. Empirical application

The logic of consociational theory has been criticised and the theoretical status of the favourable conditions is in particular ambiguous. In addition to this, the empirical application of the favourable conditions is dubious too. Belgium is

<sup>40</sup> PAPPALARDO, A., o.c., 1981, 380.

<sup>41</sup> MACDOWALL, D., *Lebanon : A conflict of minorities*, London : The Minority Rights Group, 1986.

<sup>42</sup> PAPPALARDO, A., o.c., 1981, 387.

<sup>43</sup> LIJPHART, A., o.c., 1985, 116.

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regarded as a crown example of consociational democracy, although it can be argued that most of the favourable conditions do not apply to this country.

Belgium can hardly be regarded as a perfect example of a country with a multiple balance of power situation. There are only two important segments in Belgium. The Flemings are in a clear numerical majority, the economic dominance of Flanders (over Wallonia) is obvious and the Francophone cultural hegemony is at least weakened, if not simply historical. It can therefore be argued that Belgium's institutions are modelled so as to provide a dual (and not a multiple) balance of power. Most experts on nationalism and ethnic conflict seem to agree that such an existence of two and only two ethnic groups<sup>44</sup> within a country normally makes it difficult to maintain political unity and peace. Dominique Schnapper concludes, after having discussed nationalism in Belgium, 'The reciprocal position of the two groups is a constant threat to national unity'<sup>45</sup>. Luc Reyckler elaborates on the practical management of ethnic conflicts and states: 'Some of the most difficult conflicts to manage can be found in countries with predominantly two ethnic groups (dyadic conflicts) which are asymmetrically related with respect to power, population and the interest at stake. With a high propensity for violence, they tend to become protracted conflicts'<sup>46</sup>.

It can be discussed whether Belgium is a small country or not, the answer depending on the comparison made<sup>47</sup>. If the political leaders know each other any better in Belgium than in other countries or if the decision load in Belgium is smaller than elsewhere are open questions. Foreign threats represented by German invasions in both World Wars may have helped to unite some Belgians, but did indeed foster an accentuation of the internal conflict as well, as Francophones perceived the Flemish movement to flirt with the occupiers.

Stein Rokkan points out that the most important political cleavages, at least historically speaking, actually fell together in Belgium<sup>48</sup>. Of the two languages, he argues, one was an elite language, the other was not. The established political and economic elite all over the country identified with the French language. The Flemish opposition was therefore an expression of both the class conflict and a territorial-cultural conflict. The Catholic hierarchy together with Liberal unions managed for a long time to maintain the contact between the two cultural groups,

<sup>44</sup> It can of course be contested if Dutch-speakers and French-speakers form different ethnic groups, and even if they do, they are not the only ethnic groups in Belgium. For the sake of the argument, however, these considerations are left out here.

<sup>45</sup> SCHNAPPER, D., *Community of Citizens. On the Modern Idea of Nationality*, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers: 1998, p. 100.

<sup>46</sup> REYCHLER, L., *Democratic Peace-building and Conflict Prevention: The devil is in the transition*, Leuven: Leuven University Press: 1999, p. 110.

<sup>47</sup> The population of Belgium is 10,19 millions and the territory is 30 528 km<sup>2</sup>. In a ranking of the worlds 192 independent states, Belgium has the 75<sup>th</sup> largest population and the 135<sup>th</sup> largest territory. Within the European Union, Belgium has the 9<sup>th</sup> largest population (after Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Greece and Portugal) and the smallest but one territory (only larger than Luxembourg).

<sup>48</sup> ROKKAN, S., o.c., 1970.

but could not prevent the establishment of a regional-federal party after World War I. Briefly, a Dutch-speaking, agricultural and Catholic Flanders has been pitted against a French-speaking, industrial and secular, even anticlerical Wallonia<sup>49</sup>. Rokkan sees the fundamental reconsideration of the Belgian state structure, i.e. the genesis of federalisation, as a result of an accumulation of political crises; the growth of mass democracy, the economic mobilisation of the Flemish population and the waves of linguistic demands<sup>50</sup>. Although cleavages may crosscut to a greater extent in present-day Belgium, Rokkan's historical analysis also casts lights on actual political rhetoric and conflict patterns.

Concerning overarching loyalties, Pappalardo states that 'in Belgium nationalism is much weaker than in any other European country'<sup>51</sup>. The condition of overarching loyalties does therefore not apply to Belgium. On the other hand there is strong evidence that Flemish and Walloon nationalism is weak too<sup>52</sup>.

Brussels defies the condition of segmental isolation. Lijphart is well aware that 'In Belgium a special problem involves the bilingual capital of Brussels'<sup>53</sup>. The function as the all-Belgian capital makes Brussels a national unifier and its additional role as a European capital can serve to confirm its community-neutral status within Belgium: 'Grâce à ses caractéristiques contradictoires, Bruxelles joue actuellement un rôle de rassembleur. En tant que capitale de l'Europe, elle pourrait remplir une fonction acceptable tant pour les Flamands que pour les Wallons'<sup>54</sup>. André Leton and André Miroir go as far as to argue that as long as Brussels is in the middle, Belgium will survive<sup>55</sup>. Brussels defies the favourable condition of segmental isolation, but seems nevertheless, or maybe precisely therefore, to provide an explanation in its own force of Belgian federal unity.

Fundamentally, it is not even evident that Belgium suits the original main characteristics of a consociational democracy. The country is undisputedly a federation, but is far from an ideal consociational federation with many and small component units. The Belgian government is only a grand coalition in the sense

<sup>49</sup> FROGNIER, A.P., QUEVIT, M., STENBOCK, M., Regional Imbalances and Centre-Periphery Relationships in Belgium, pp. 251-278, in ROKKAN, S., URWIN, D.W. (Eds.), *The Politics of Territorial Identity. Studies in European Regionalism*, London: Sage, 1982.

<sup>50</sup> ROKKAN, S., Dimensions of state formation and nation-building: A possible paradigm for research on variations within Europe, pp. 562-600, in TILLY, Ch. (Ed.), *The formation of national states in Western Europe*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975.

<sup>51</sup> PAPPALARDO, A., o.c., 1981, 384.

<sup>52</sup> MADDENS, B., et al., o.c., 1999.

<sup>53</sup> LIJPHART, A., o.c., 1985: p. 126. The formal power sharing between the language groups in the Region of Brussels is ensured by a rather complex institutional structure. This is profoundly explained in SENELLE, R., The Reform of the Belgian State, pp. 266-324, in HESSE, J., WRIGHT, V. (Eds.), *Federalizing Europe? The Costs, Benefits, and Preconditions of Federal Political Systems*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

<sup>54</sup> DEWACHTER, W., La Belgique d'aujourd'hui comme société politique, pp.105-142, in DIECKHOFF, A. (Ed.), *Belgique. La force de la désunion*, Brussels: Éditions Complexe, 1996: p. 142.

<sup>55</sup> LETON, A., MIROIR, A., *Les conflits communautaires en Belgique*, Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1999.

that it includes representatives from the two main linguistic segments. Grand coalitions of representatives of all the three traditional pillars are seldom the case. In addition, the government posts are not proportionally distributed among the segments, since the French-speaking minority enjoys equal representation (with the exception of the Prime Minister) with the Dutch-speaking majority. Furthermore, federalisation can be seen to have undermined the mutual veto. Representatives of the other linguistic segment cannot veto unilateral decision-making in the Regions and Communities.

There is thus considerable disagreement concerning to what extent Belgium (and other countries) is fulfilling the favourable conditions and correspondingly to what extent it can serve as an example to consociational theory.

### V. Towards a synthesis to explain democracy and unity in a plural society

Lijphart develops his theory to explain democratic stability and unity in plural countries. However, critics have found flaws, ambiguities and logical weaknesses in this theory, especially concerning the role of the elites and its relation to the favourable conditions, and it is even dubious if the empirical examples actually fit the conditions for consociationalism. The explanatory power of the theory has been severely contested. So how then can a retained peace and functioning democracy in Belgium and other divided societies be explained? An answer can be sought through a synthesis of Lijphart and his critics, i.e. by undertaking a more elite-centred approach within a broad consociational framework.

Modern social science should take duly account of both actors and structures. A satisfactory social science explanation must include analyses of both the micro- (individual) and the macro- (society) level. Lijphart's theory is mainly concerned with macro-variables at the level of the political system within states. Most analyses of the micro-level are based on rational choice theory. However, it is clear that a pure rational choice approach implies some serious problems<sup>56</sup>. In some cases it is impossible to tell what the rational choice will be. All possible actions can cause both advantages and disadvantages and these are impossible to weight against each other in a rational way. In other cases different actions may be equally effective or rational in order to achieve a certain aim. In such cases the usefulness of rational choice theory is limited. Not to mention situations where people do not behave rationally at all. Importantly, individual as well as group rationality can only be understood within certain constraints. Variations in political and social outcome are thus the result of actors' behaviour within a framework not only of preferences, information and opportunity costs, but also institutional constraints<sup>57</sup>.

<sup>56</sup> ELSTER, J., Introduction, pp. 1-33, in ELSTER, J. (Ed.), *Rational Choice*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986.

<sup>57</sup> FRIEDMAN, D., HECHTER, M., 'The Contribution of Rational Choice Theory to Macrosociological Research', *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 6, 1988 (Fall), p. 201-218.



George Tsebelis has transfused the logic of rational choice and game theories to the study of consociationalism<sup>58</sup>. Along with the main criticism of Lijphart, Tsebelis objects that consociational theory tends to omit the strategic aspect of elite behaviour. He cannot accept that accommodative behaviour by the elites is treated as an independent variable in the theory. Whereas consociational literature presupposes that elites share a concern for the political system and co-operate accordingly, Tsebelis finds that elites, even within consociational systems like Belgium, sometimes initiate political conflict. This choice of conflict can appear illogic (or suboptimal in the language of game theory) when accommodation is possible, and is only understandable in the view of context. Context is introduced to game theory by what Tsebelis calls nested games, i.e. a whole network of games in different arenas or concerning institutional change: 'if actors do not choose what appears to be the optimizing strategy, it is because they are involved in nested games : games in multiple arenas or institutional design'<sup>59</sup>.

Tsebelis sees the mobilisation over linguistic issues and the proceeding political conflicts in Belgium from the 1960s onwards as initiated by political elites playing a double or nested game. On the parliamentary arena the rules of pragmatism and compromise were adhered to, but this game combined with a game on the electoral arena, much more ideological and polarised. By seeking conflict over linguistic issues, elites could both win credit in the electorate by faithfully representing the interests of a linguistic segment *and* convince parliamentary opponents that the polarising situation could only be managed if the opponents gave in.

The continuous negotiations and conflicts over community problems in Belgium can, within a rational choice theoretical framework, also be regarded as iterated games<sup>60</sup>. According to Tsebelis, the best strategy in playing repeated or iterated games varies between mutual co-operation and alternating defection, or in other words between compromise and a combination of unilateral decisions. In Belgium both solutions have been adopted. Some issues are dealt with through consociational devices of negotiation and decision-making, others, due to the process of federalisation, are left to the segments to decide upon unilaterally. Tsebelis argues that since consociational features are institutionalised in Belgium (formal rules ensuring grand coalition, mutual veto, proportionality and segmental autonomy and federalism), policy outcomes tend to be collectively optimal, and thus can consociationalism be understood as a rational choice. But the rules of iterated games do not always apply. The status of Brussels was of such an importance to all parties during the Egmont Pact negotiations in 1977-78, that this

<sup>58</sup> TSEBELIS, G., *Nested Games. Rational Choice in Comparative Politics*, Berkeley : University of California Press, 1990. For the application to consociationalism, see especially Chapter 6 : 'A Rational-Choice Approach to Consociationalism', pp. 159-186.

<sup>59</sup> TSEBELIS, G., *o.c.*, 1990, p. 10.

<sup>60</sup> The terminology is subtle here. *Nested* (or double, triple...) games are typically taking place simultaneously but at different arenas. The actors can pursue suboptimal strategies in one game (at one arena) in order to increase gains in another game (at another arena). *Iterated* games are a series of repeated games (typically at the same arena) in which the actors can learn from experience and plan for the future.

conflict can only be analysed as a single-shot game<sup>61</sup>. The failure of the Egmont Pact illustrates that even when all consociational measures are resorted to in secret elite negotiations, the elites cannot avoid conflict when the issue at stake is of crucial importance to all parties.

Rational choice theory and consociationalism have several points of contact. Tsebelis shows how consociationalism can result from a series of rational choices or iterated games. Furthermore, it is clear that consociational structures are part of the context or the institutions that constrain or open up possibilities for political actors.

The Belgian scholar Kris Deschouwer takes a more institutionalist point of view than Tsebelis. Deschouwer builds on the general theoretical concepts of Lijphart and defines consociational democracy as 'social segmentation and, via the organisational penetration, incorporation and encapsulation of those segments, a high degree of pillarization of (...) society'<sup>62</sup>. According to Deschouwer, Belgium has developed from a 'classic' to a 'federal' consociation. The modern Belgian society is just as segmented and pillarised as it used to be, the only difference being that the language groups have substituted the traditional pillars.

Deschouwer's main point concerning the relation between consociationalism and the choices of political actors is that although Belgium is still the prime example of a consociational democracy, the consociational tools are normally reserved for the big crises and are not used in the every-day life of politics: 'the adoption of consociational structures and techniques has historically occurred in the context of crisis management'<sup>63</sup>. Consociationalism is thus more a technique of crisis solving than a normal pattern of behaviour. On this point, it is clear that Deschouwer is more actor-oriented than Lijphart. To Lijphart, consociationalism can be interpreted as a framework binding the political elites. According to Deschouwer, the elites are in fact free to choose whether to use consociational approaches to reach an agreement or not.

Whereas Lijphart sees consociationalism as a type of democracy, Tsebelis regards it merely as a result of political games. Deschouwer takes a middle position. To him, consociationalism is primarily a way of decision-making. In fact, the same concept is used to describe three different features of the Belgian polity. Firstly, consociational arrangements are laid down in the Constitution and are thus parts of the democratic structure of the country. Secondly, consociationalism can represent collectively optimal outcomes in repeated rounds of negotiations. Finally, in Deschouwer's view, the political elites can resort to more extraordinary consociational measures in order to find solutions to an acute problem. This was

<sup>61</sup> COVELL, M., 'Agreeing to Disagree: Elite Bargaining and the Revision of the Belgian Constitution', *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 15, 1982 (3), p. 451-469.

<sup>62</sup> DESCHOUWER, K., From consociation to federation. How the Belgian parties won, pp. 74-107, p. 91, in LUTHER, K.R., DESCHOUWER, K. (Eds.), *Party Elites in Divided Societies. Political Parties in Consociational Democracy*, London: Routledge, 1999.

<sup>63</sup> DESCHOUWER, K., *o.c.*, 1999: 80.

for instance the case when eight parties negotiated a reform of the judicial system after the White March in 1996.

Although Deschouwer accepts the general framework of the consociational model, he stresses that the change from a classic to a federal consociationalism has altered the political system in Belgium and has thus changed the nature and the interest of the main political actors. To him, consociationalism is only a structural device the political elites are free to use or an institutional framework within which they are free to act. The elites have used the consociational structures to federalise the country, contain the community conflict and thereby manage sub-state nationalism.

Liesbet Hooghe has taken an active part in the theoretical debate on consociationalism and applies what she calls a political-activist perspective to explain the Belgian federalisation process<sup>64</sup>. Her perspective is founded on the political parties' strategies and includes a set of constraints on the actors' freedom, and is thus a rational choice approach. However, as both Tsebelis and Deschouwer, Hooghe maintains a consociational framework of analysis, although consociationalism now is reduced to a constraint or an institution among others that shape the behaviour of the political actors. Hooghe points out that when it comes to managing nationalist conflicts, the political elites are often more conflict oriented than the general public. Conflicting identities and diverging interests do not alone determine conflict. Just as important are resources for political mobilisation and, crucially, the ability, strategy, tactics and perseverance of the elites<sup>65</sup>. As Tsebelis, Hooghe denies that consociational structures render political conflicts impossible. It seems as if the consociational principles of segmental accommodation and elite coalescence are only followed insofar as they serve the self-interests of the political elites involved in the decision-making process. This clearly shows the resemblance between Hooghe and Deschouwer too. They both see consociationalism more as a possibility than as an imperative. However, the freedom of the political actors is in general restricted by political institutions and formal and informal rules, by the necessity of finding a compromise with other political actors, by the international environment and by the expectations of their audiences (e.g. the general public, constituencies or party militants). It is only within these constraints that a political actor can behave strategically: 'Within the limits of these extensive constraints, the strategic behaviour of political actors ultimately shapes nationalist conflict and decides how this conflict will be managed'<sup>66</sup>. The corner stone of Hooghe's perspective is that political actors use the nationalist conflict as a tactical or strategic tool to reach political aims such as government positions.

<sup>64</sup> HOOGHE, L., *A Leap in the Dark : Nationalist Conflict and Federal Reform in Belgium*, Itacha : Western Societies Program, Occasional Paper no. 27, Cornell University, 1991.

<sup>65</sup> HOOGHE, L., Nationalist Movements and Social Factors : a Theoretical Perspective, pp. 21-44, in COAKLEY, J. (Ed.), *The Social Origin of Nationalist Movements. The Contemporary West European Experience*, London : Sage, 1992.

<sup>66</sup> HOOGHE, L., *o.c.*, 1991.

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Hooghe's analysis is illustrated by the process leading up to the 1988 State Reform. During the 1980s, the Belgian state came under increasing pressure from on the one hand the European integration process and on the other hand from the steadily more comprehensive regionalisation resulting from the 1980 State Reform. The negotiations leading up to the 1988 Reform followed an almost perfect consociational pattern. An agreement was achieved after long and secret elite negotiations. All participants rejected separatism and a real effort was made to reach a deal. The result was an extremely complicated compromise that combined solutions of several issues, most important the Voeren/Fouron-issue and the status of Brussels. It is quite clear that both the CVP and the PS used the federalisation of the country to maintain their dominance in their respective Regions and at the same time stay in power at the federal level. This last point is crucial. As long as the main actors can maintain their federal power, or at least have reasonable prospects of obtaining it or return to it, it will not be in their interest to break up the federation.

Eventually, Hooghe can be seen to bridge Tsebelis and Deschouwer: The actors are rational and can choose to use consociational structures to solve problems and obtain goals. She explains Belgian federalism, as well as the continuous unity of the country, as the result of political actors negotiating their political ideas and interests within a general framework of consociationalism, and at the same time being constrained by more specific conditions such as the economic conjunctures, the secularisation of society, the process of European integration and the complexity of population distribution in Brussels. Within these constraints, it is the aims and the strategies of the political actors that decide the development.

Here we have approached a theoretical synthesis of Lijphart and his critics. Tsebelis' as well as Deschouwer's theoretical elaborations, but first and foremost Hooghe's application of a political-activist perspective, focusing on the elites' aims and actions in relation to consociational possibilities and constraints, provide a logical link between macro-level social, historical and political conditions and micro-level elite behaviour. Lijphart's theory highlights significant preconditions for consociational democracy, but fails to produce concrete tools for its explanation. Rational choice theory faces the inverse problem. Its explanatory power is strong (as long as actors behave rationally), but crucial context tends to be ignored. Even Tsebelis admits that: 'It is true that historical, temporal, cultural, racial, or other qualifiers do not enter directly into any rational choice explanation' and asks rhetorically: 'What kind of explanation seems to exclude everything that matters?'<sup>67</sup>. Tsebelis tries to rescue context through his concept of nested games. To Deschouwer, consociational devices are tools that can be resorted to in situations of political crises. Hooghe's incorporation of consociational structures into her political-activist perspective is as far as we get in finding a theoretical unification of conditions and explanation, of context and behaviour.

<sup>67</sup> TSEBELIS, G., *o.c.*, 1990, 44.

## VI. Conclusion

I have shown how consociational theory has developed throughout Lijphart's writings, via critiques and by incorporation into more actor-oriented approaches. Consociational theory is meant to explain how and why democratic efficiency and political unity can be maintained in divided, plural societies. Countries fulfilling a checklist of favourable conditions are more likely than others to work according to consociational principles, but the success of consociationalism will in the last instance depend upon accommodative elite behaviour. Critics of consociational theory have found both theoretical flaws and dubious empirical applications. The main problem is that consociational theory can only point to some factors influencing or *conditioning* peace and democracy and not *explain* how accommodative elite behaviour and consociational democracy come about. To provide a profound explanation, as well as to avoid important theoretical ambiguity, a more actor-oriented approach must be undertaken. Rational choice theory is actor-oriented and can centre round political elites. Within the framework of a political-activist perspective, political outcome is explained by the aims and strategies of the main political actors. In Belgium, these are preconditioned by consociational structures. Only this kind of perspective can take duly account of both micro-level human behaviour and the macro-level structures framing it. Future analyses of how and why politics works in consociational democracies should therefore apply a more actor-oriented approach than what Lijphart pursues.

Lijphart's consociationalism gave good reasons to be optimistic on behalf of a continuous peace and democracy in plural societies. To the extent Belgium fits the model, its success is guaranteed. More actor-oriented approaches appear less optimistic. According to them, the faith of Belgium (or any other state for that matter) depends on the self-interests of the political elites. Such interests can change according to circumstance, and do not in any case represent a guarantee for a continued unity of Belgium, although some structural constraints and federal arrangements make a split-up of the country very difficult.

### **Summary : Consociationalism : theoretical development illustrated by the case of Belgium**

*The theory on consociational democracies has evolved significantly in the last decades. One aim of the article is to discuss this development. Arend Lijphart's groundbreaking book from 1977 has inspired critics and lead to important theoretical amelioration. A main problem has been the lack of theoretical connections between the favourable conditions for consociational democracy and accommodative elite behaviour. This reduces the explanatory power of the traditional consociational model. To resolve this, one option is to incorporate elements of consociational theory into more actor-oriented approaches. Such a solution is the closest we come to a functioning synthesis of Lijphart and his critics, and several attempts to combine macro- and micro-level analyses are discussed in the article. The*

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*empirical case of Belgium is applied throughout the article to illustrate the theoretical elaboration.*