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Item Type	Journal article
Authors	Bogaards, Matthijs;Helms, Ludger;Lijphart, Arend
DOI	10.1111/spsr.12384
Publisher	Wiley
Rights	CC BY-NC-ND 4.0
Download date	2024-12-12 23:04:22
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Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14018/13829

The Importance of Consociationalism for Twenty-First Century Politics and Political Science

MATTHIJS BOGAARDS¹, LUDGER HELMS² AND AREND LIJPHART³

¹Central European University

²University of Innsbruck

³University of California

Abstract: Five decades after the term consociationalism made its debut in the comparative politics of divided societies, the huge body of international literature it has sparked continues to grow. In an era of populism and polarization, interest in the many facets of consociationalism is at an all-time high. This introduction to the special issue of *Half a Century of Consociationalism: Cases and Comparisons* gives an impression of the contemporary state of the consociational research agenda. In addition, the introduction suggests some potentially rewarding new avenues, such as leadership studies, and cautions against the conflation of consociationalism and power sharing. It also voices some skepticism about the suggested promise of large N-quantitative studies in a field still dominated by case-based research. Overall, the introduction and the contributions to this special issue demonstrate the importance of consociationalism for twenty-first century politics and political science – empirically, normatively, and prescriptively.

KEYWORDS: Consociational democracy, Comparative Politics, Populism, Polarisation, Conflict

Consociationalism's Place in an Era of Polarization

Half a century after the first article with “consociationalism” in the title was published (Lijphart 1969), the consociational literature is booming. As we will document below in this introduction to the special issue of *Half a Century of Consociationalism: Cases and Comparisons*, the number of journal articles on consociationalism has never been higher, the range of empirical cases never larger, and the topics covered never more diverse.

For all that, the second decade of the twenty-first century seems unlikely to be remembered as an era of consociationalism or consociational democracy. To many, the Trump experience in the US marks the unrivalled showcase of polarizing political leadership that has produced a deeply divided country. Even a cursory glance, however, reveals that the US is not an exception but rather a frontrunner among the established democracies, with Trump apparently having served as a role model for other polarizing political leaders, from the British Nationalists to President Bolsonaro of Brazil. Indeed, polarization has come to mark the politics of many other countries across the globe, as reflected in an impressive outpour of scholarly writing. The *Annals* of the American Academy of Political and Social Science devoted a special issue to this phenomenon in early 2019, entitled, “Polarizing Politics: A Global Threat to Democracy”, which includes case studies on eleven countries, from Venezuela via Hungary and Poland through Thailand and Bangladesh (McCoy and Somer 2019a).

Political polarization is not invariably, or necessarily, a threat to democracy, though. Indeed, a certain amount of polarization (in terms of making diverging interests and preferences tangible, without contesting the legitimacy of possible alternatives) is required for a pluralist democracy to flourish. After all, the contention that there are “no alternatives”, and nothing to legitimately disagree about, is barely less dangerous for democracy than some forms of polarization can be (Helms 2016). What is, however, certainly detrimental to any form of genuinely democratic governance is what McCoy and Somer (2019b: 8) refer to as “pernicious polarization”, marked by a pronounced and entrenched “us vs. them” ideology, which turns different political forces into deeply distrustful political enemies. While political polarization does not necessarily lead to social polarization, it often does, and the observed effects of advanced levels of toxic polarization in politics and society extend from deadlock via social unrest to civil war.

As to the causes of polarization, we know from research on the US that the institutional foundations of political competition play an important role (Bogaards 2015; Lijphart 2015; Taylor et al. 2014), as do developments at the level of, inter alia, party differences, the dimensionability of political conflict, and of economic inequality (Barber and McCarty 2015). The effects of particular patterns of socialization are certainly relevant as well: if individuals and groups have never experienced less polarized times, and forms of interaction, they are likely to, if perhaps unconsciously, cement the status quo.

This introduction is obviously not the place to inquire in any more detail into the underlying causes of polarization, or the conditions that provide a particularly fruitful breeding ground for polarizing politics and its manifold negative implications for the idea and practice of democratic governance. One other prominent driver of polarization, which has been observed in different types of regime, is, however, to be briefly mentioned here: populism. While, again, not necessarily incompatible with democracy (if very often at least latently challenging the nature of liberal democracy as a particular form of limited government; see e.g. Galston 2018), populism has coincided with, and often fueled political and social polarization in many countries (De la Torre 2019).¹ Today, populism and polarization are essentially two sides of the same coin.

Turning to the question as to what place there is for consociationalism in ever more polarized and divided societies, and the scientific study thereof, we contend that, ultimately, the value of consociationalism as a concept for peaceful conflict regulation *increases* with the degree of polarization and division in a given society. As an idea, consociationalism is not precluded by the existence of deeply polarized and divided societies; rather, consociational democracy emerges from these divisions – as one distinct and distinctive developmental option for a given society. As this requires not least the committed collaboration of elites representing those different groups, consociationalism is not just a counter-model to majoritarian rule with its inherent polarizing features, but also a distinctively non-populist conception of democracy.

While populism is, essentially, an anti-elitist ideology, consociationalism is, at its very heart, about power sharing between political elites. As such, consociationalism marks not just a theoretical alternative to polarized and/or populist government, but a possible political solution for overcoming its fundamental flaws and distinct costs in constitutional practice. Two contributions to this special issue deal directly with the relationship between consociationalism and polarization: Howe’s (2019) analysis of the history and future of consociationalism in the United States, and Freiburghaus and Vatter’s (2019) analysis of

¹ For an account that links populism to Katz and Mair’s thesis of the cartel party, see Bogaards (2017a).

Swiss policy making. As the Italian approach to consociationalism in the context of the polarized party system of the First Republic suggests, though, polarization and segmentation present specific challenges that may require similar but subtly different responses in order to be overcome (Bogaards 2005). Indeed, while consociationalism in plural societies is premised on inclusion, “militant consociational democracy” (Bogaards forthcoming), deliberately excludes the extreme right from the consociational grand coalition in order to protect democratic values. In Belgium, the same parties that work together across the country’s linguistic divisions in an elaborate consociational federation have systematically excluded the Flemish and francophone extreme-right parties from electoral, legislative, and governmental cooperation.

The lion’s share of this introductory piece is devoted to revisiting the more recent international research on different aspects of consociationalism. In what follows, we seek to offer both a qualitative and quantitative assessment of consociationalism research after half a century. The aim is to provide some key statistics on the development of the consociational literature as found in a selection of journal articles, namely those covered in the Web of Science. This introduction is not a scoping study, let alone a systematic review (Dacombe 2018), but rather seeks to attest to the impressive vibrancy of the consociational research agenda in contemporary political research.

The Latest Generation of Consociationalism Research Revisited

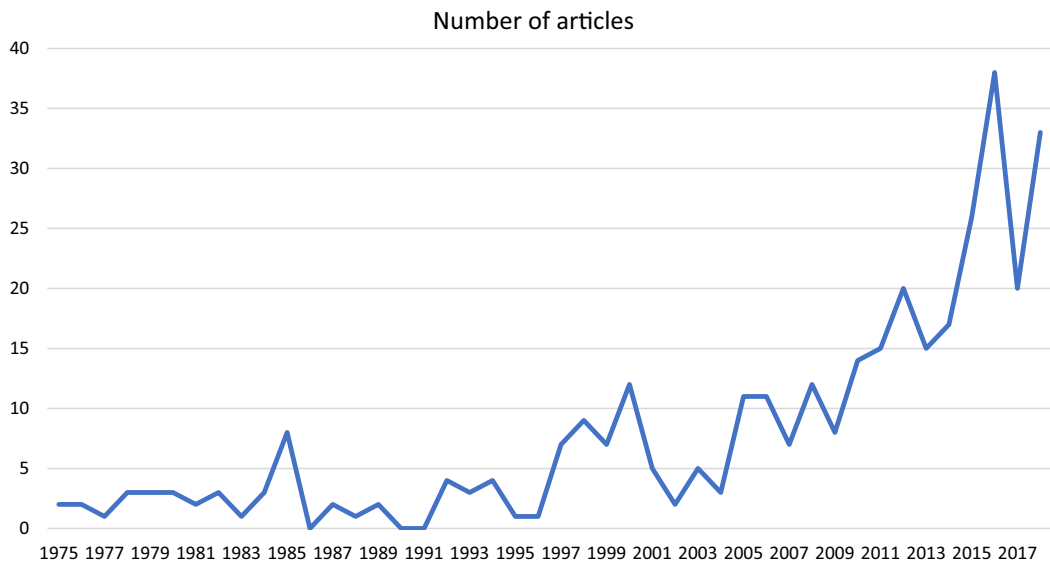
In 2018, more articles were published on consociationalism than ever before. The Web of Science lists 17 articles with consociationalism in the title, a record.² If one broadens the search to articles that mention consociationalism in the abstract and/or keywords, the number is even higher: 33 articles in 2018.³ These scores are not an incident but reflect a clear trend towards an increased interest in consociationalism starting shortly after the beginning of the new millennium. Other sources and indicators, such as Google Scholar, confirm the dynamic identified.

Figure 1 shows how the number of consociational articles has increased, especially in the new millennium. No less than 80 per cent of the 346 articles on consociationalism recorded were published after 2000. Unfortunately, Web of Science only starts in 1975 and therefore does not contain the earliest articles on consociationalism (such as Lijphart 1968, 1969). There are other omissions. First, the data set does not include books, a serious miss given that some of the main contributions to the field have come in the form of monographs (Bogaards 2014; Lijphart 1975, 1977, 1985; Steiner 1974) and edited volumes (Crepaz et al. 2002; Jakala et al. 2018; McCulloch and McGarry 2017; McEvoy and O’Leary 2013; McRae 1974; Noel 2005; Reynolds 2002; Taylor 2009b); the volume with Lijphart’s selected writings on democracy (Lijphart 2008) is not accounted for either. Second, also lacking from this overview are the many publications in languages other than English. This is true, for example, for the Italian literature on “consociativismo” (Bogaards 2005) or the German literature on “Proporzdemokratie” and “Konkordanzdemokratie” (Köppl and Kranenpohl 2012), the latter of which has been inspired by Lehmbruch’s pioneering work (Lehmbruch

² The search term used is “consociation*” to capture not just consociationalism but also consociational and consociation. Another recent publication that uses the Web of Science to obtain an overview of relevant literature is Doorenspleet (2019).

³ For this category, 2016 was an even better year with 38 mentions of consociation*. Please note that these scores are lower than the raw number of Web of Science results, which also contain irrelevant publications.

Figure 1: An Overview of Journal Articles on Consociationalism over Time



Source: Based on Web of Science. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

1967).⁴ This leads to a systematic bias, as for some countries the literature is only available in the local language. For example, to learn about consociationalism in Luxemburg, one needs to read French (Clément 2012; Govaert 1997). Third, the contributions of local experts publishing in local/regional journals and local/regional publishing houses also remain under the radar. This matters especially for the non-Western world, as the bibliographies in Lijphart (1977) and Bogaards (2014) show.⁵

Renewed scholarly interest in democracy in divided societies in general and consociationalism in particular coincides with “the wave of power-sharing democracy” (Lijphart 2002). Using Google Scholar, Taylor (2009a: 6) found 39 countries that had been linked to consociationalism in the title of a publication, though Guelke (2012: 118) criticizes the “loose usage of consociationalism” evident in the list. Reading through the work of some leading consociational scholars, Dixon (2018) identifies 44 countries that have been claimed as consociational. The validity of this list may be exaggerated, as not all of the alleged cases are likely to stand up to closer scrutiny. Indeed, Dixon (2018: 67) accuses scholars of conceptual stretching, loosening the definition to increase the number of corresponding cases.⁶ On the other hand, the list would be even longer if it also included self-governing regions, such as South Tyrol (Carla 2018), or cities like Beirut (Deets 2018), Brussels (Mulle 2016), and Belfast (Nagle 2009).

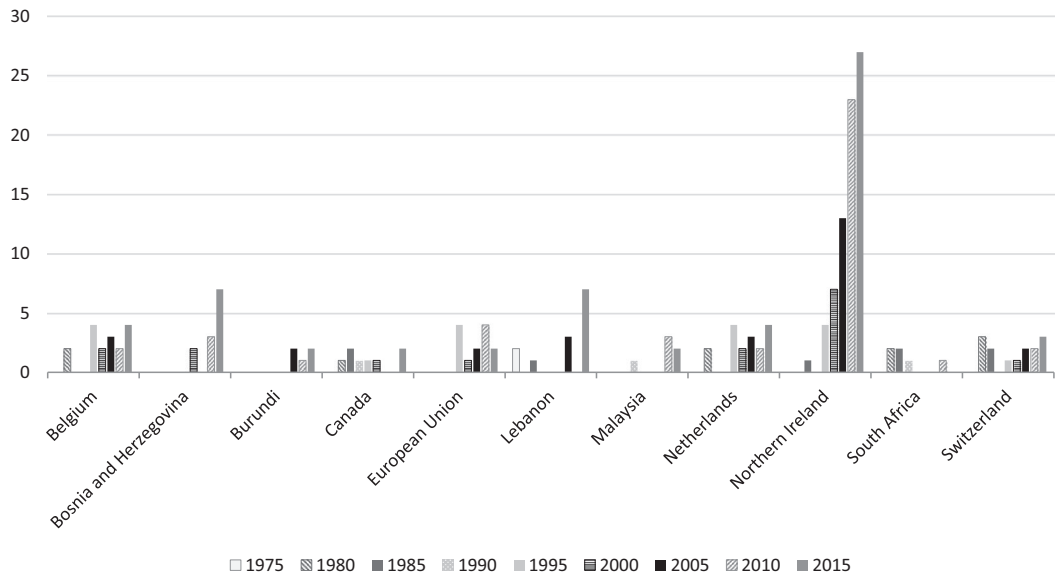
Figure 2 provides an overview over time of the countries covered in consociational articles. It only contains countries with at least three mentions overall and groups

⁴ For an English introduction to, and appraisal of, this literature, see the contributions in Schneider and Eberlein (2015).

⁵ Another example: Web of Science does not include the special issue of the *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* from May 2013 in honor of Arend Lijphart.

⁶ For a discussion of the boundaries of the concept of consociationalism, see the exchange between Bogaards (2000) and Lijphart (2000).

Figure 2: Consociational Country Coverage over Time

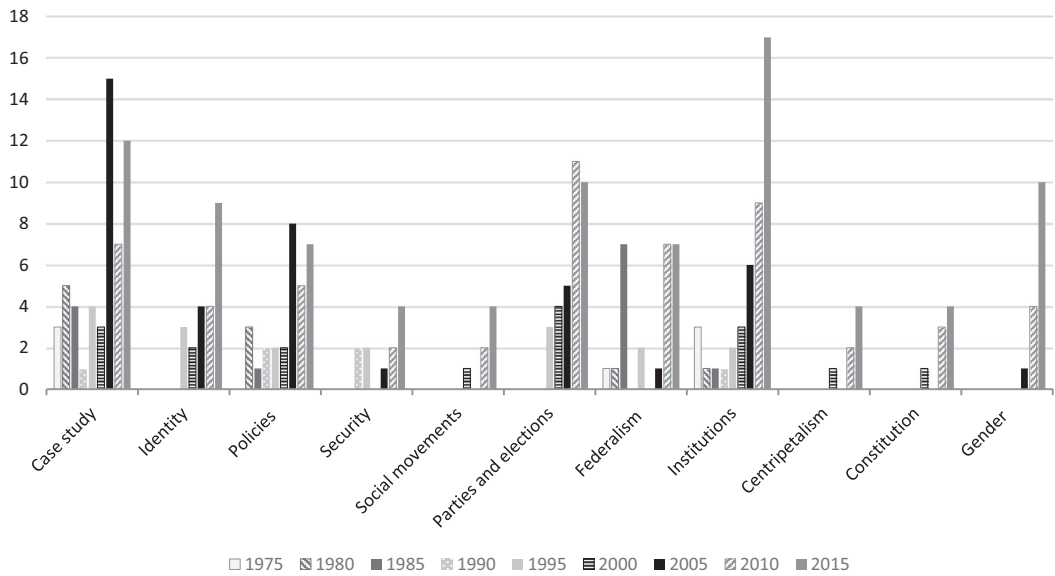


Note: Publications are grouped together for periods of five years, starting with the period 1975-1979. The last period is 2015-2018.
 Source: Based on Web of Science.

publications together for periods of five years, starting with the period 1975-1979.⁷ Figure 2 indicates that the contemporary consociational literature is dominated by the case of Northern Ireland. This started with the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 and, if anything, the focus on Northern Ireland is now more pronounced than ever. In fact, figure 2 even underrepresents the dominance of Northern Ireland, as many of the comparative studies, which are coded separately, also include Northern Ireland. This special issue would therefore not have been complete without McGlinchey’s (2019) case study of Northern Ireland. The interest in Belgium is more recent and goes hand-in-hand with the process of federalization in the country. At the same time, we see a steady interest in two other classic consociations: the Netherlands and Switzerland. Surprisingly, with only two articles on Austria, both from 2018, this classic consociation does not even feature in figure 2. This marks the article by Helms et al. (2019) on Austrian consociationalism, and “de-consociationalization”, in this special issue as a particularly useful addition to the international literature. The contributions by Andeweg (2019), and by Adeney and Swenden (2019), too, show how consociationalism in the Netherlands, Belgium, and India has evolved and changed over time. Overall, the process of “de-consociationalization” is no less fascinating and important a subject of inquiry as research on the factors that contribute to the emergence of consociationalist regimes (Bogaards 1998). Despite the critical appraisal of consociational interpretations of the EU (Bogaards 2002), such notions have not lost their appeal, and the contribution by Piattoni and Verzichelli (2019) to this special issue presents the state-of-the-art in this field. Other developments have been

⁷ The list therefore excludes an influential case like Iraq. The combination of temporary and liberal consociational elements, what Bogaards () calls “consociationalism light”, prepared the country badly for its democratic future.

Figure 3: Consociational Topics over Time



Note: Publications are grouped together for periods of five years, starting with the period 1975-1979. The last period is 2015-2018.

Source: Own coding, based on Web of Science.

less even. While the classic non-Western consociations in Malaysia and Lebanon continue to attract consociational interest, South Africa has disappeared somewhat from view. Instead, Burundi is now widely seen as the main African case of consociationalism.

As the number of cases of consociationalism has grown, so has the range of topics. The case of Northern Ireland in particular has become a prism through which the many facets of consociational democracy are studied. Figure 3 provides an overview of the topics covered in the consociational articles recorded by Web of Science. For ease of interpretation, it contains all categories with more than 10 entries in total or at least four entries in the last four years. As with figure 2, publications are grouped together for periods of five years. Coding was done by the authors who determined one topic per article, based on the title, abstract, and, if necessary, the full text. Figure 3 reveals a continuing scholarly interest in consociational policies, parties, and elections. Theory-applying case studies in which scholars assess to what extent a political system exhibits consociational features and conforms to consociational theory remain a staple of the literature. Issues of identity politics are also a recurring theme in the consociational literature.

Interest in the way that consociations institutionalize the four principles of the grand coalition, proportionality, segmental autonomy, and mutual veto is stronger than ever. In addition, there is a new line of research that looks at the impact of consociationalism on more specific institutions, again driven by the experience of Northern Ireland. For example, Cole (2015) examines in detail how parliamentary committees scrutinize the government in a democracy without opposition. His conclusions are sobering and are presented to stimulate further research on consociational legislatures. In contrast, Foster's (2015) analysis of the regional Public Accounts Committee and Conley's (2013) study of question time in parliament are more sanguine.

The increase in consociational publications on federalism is closely tied to federalization in Belgium.⁸ New is the interest in social movements and in gender and sexual minorities. Nagle stands out as the scholar who has arguably done most to put social movements and sexual minorities on the consociational research agenda, focusing on Lebanon and Northern Ireland (see, e.g., Nagle 2016, 2018). Following Hayes and McAllister's (2013) study of the gender gap in support for Northern Ireland's consociational institutions, interest in the position of women in consociational democracies has surged. In line with the tendency of new consociations to constitutionalize their consociational arrangements (Bogaards 2017b), scholarly interest in constitutions and courts has also increased in the last couple of years. Several recent articles focus on the rival theories of and prescriptions for institutional design in post-conflict societies: centripetalism versus consociationalism. Although Bieber (2019: 1) might be right that the debate on consociationalism vs. centripetalism is "stale", Bogaards' (2019b) contribution to this special issue shows the promise of a new line of research on consociationalism *and* centripetalism.

It should be stressed that much of the contemporary consociational literature is quite critical. It suffices to pick any article about consociationalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina to find oneself confronted with a searing diagnosis of its dysfunctional political system. The same is true for Lebanon. The consociational literature on Northern Ireland is divided, as shown nicely by the contributions to Taylor (2009b). Actually, consociationalism has attracted a range of critiques from the very beginning – Lijphart (1985) and O'Leary (2005) provide helpful overviews and responses. The classic complaints were about alleged poor democratic quality, the difficulties of policy making, clientelism, the reinforcement of socio-cultural divisions, and the view of elites as the solution and citizens as the problem. These established agendas have more recently come to be complemented by other issues, such as the position of women and consociational "others": minorities that are left out of the consociational bargain (Stojanović 2018).⁹

Several important topics do not show up in figure 3.¹⁰ First, the potential for deliberation in consociations, which Steiner and Jaramillo (2019) use to refine the cultural aspect of consociational theory. Second, the distinction between inter-party and intra-party consociationalism (Bogaards 2014), what McGarry (2019a: 6) calls "a distinctive extension" of the literature. Indeed, if Canada, Fiji immediately after independence, India during Congress Party rule, Kenya as a one-party state, Malaysia under the Alliance Party/Barisan Nasional, South Africa after apartheid, and the former Yugoslavia ever were consociational, that was because of the representation and accommodation of socio-cultural groups *within* the dominant party, not the typical coalition *between* communal parties. Third, the debate about the merits of corporate versus liberal consociationalism (McGarry and O'Leary 2007), which goes back to the distinction between self-determination and pre-determination of the segments (Lijphart [1991] 2008: 66-74). The difference between the two is that whereas corporate consociationalism pre-determines who shares power, for example through group quota, liberal consociationalism merely prescribes power sharing, leaving open *who* will share power. The last option is deemed to have several advantages, as already detailed in Lijphart [1991] (2008).

⁸ The previous peak in publications on federalism and consociationalism represents a special issue of *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* from 1985 (15/2) on this topic.

⁹ Rothchild and Roeder's (2005) critique of power sharing as an impediment to peace and democracy is much more a critique of power sharing in its many manifestations than consociational power sharing as such, as even a quick look at the features and the corresponding cases reveals.

¹⁰ Other categories that did not contain enough articles to make it into figure 3 are political theory, media and communication, and transitional justice.

For all the manifold facets of consociationalism covered in the recent literature, there is one curiously understudied aspect in the study of consociational governance that we believe would deserve to be given more systematic attention in future consociationalism-related research: leadership. Perhaps surprisingly for those who equate leadership with classic forms of majoritarian democracy, the British Westminster system has more recently been characterized as a type of democracy whose conventional ethos “leaves very little room for either the idea, or the practice, of leadership” (Foley 2013: 11)¹¹, which implies that the system has a limited demand for leadership. By contrast, the concept of consociationalism has acknowledged from the very beginning that effective leadership by the leaders of competing groups in deeply divided societies mark a *sine qua non* for successful consociational governance. Indeed, it would not be too much of an exaggeration to contend that the agency of elites, representing different groups, marks the key to any consociational arrangement (Bogaards 1998). While, in the long run, institutions may be even more important than the behavior of individual actors, these institutions do not emerge out of the blue but have to be devised by responsible actors in the first place.

Recent changes in the field of leadership studies pave the way for a reconsideration of leadership in the consociational literature. There has been an upsurge of political leadership research, underscored by the launch of new book series, handbooks and journals specifically devoted to leadership issues (see Elgie 2015; Helms 2012; Rhodes and ‘t Hart 2014). Even more important, there has been a paradigmatic change amongst the scholarly leadership community in terms of what makes for good and bad leadership. “Strong leaders”, getting their own way more often than not, have been identified as “a myth” (Brown 2015), or at the very least a most dangerous possibility to be dismissed decisively. Most normative conceptions of timely and good leadership now center on different forms of “cooperative leadership” or “collective leadership” (Brown 2016; Helms 2019).

It would seem rewarding for consociationalism scholars to use the ongoing sea change in leadership studies to link their established core issues with those newly emerging agendas. As Poguntke and Webb suggest, “leaders in consensual systems ... may be able to justify their decisions by referring to the constraints imposed upon them by veto players. In this sense, the very nature of consensual politics provides them with additional power resources” (Poguntke and Webb 2005: 12). Thus, while there is certainly more to consociational leadership than what usually meets the eye, this should come as an incentive to explore the effective powerhouse of consociational regimes more carefully rather than a welcome excuse for ignoring it.

Consociationalism and Power Sharing

Guelke (2019: 1) notes that “power-sharing and consociationalism tend to be treated as overlapping concepts”. This has resulted in considerable confusion up to the point where contemporary readers always have to check whether the author means *consociational* power sharing or power sharing in general (Bogaards 2000). Clearly, the latter concept is much broader and the (quantitative) literature on power sharing has developed largely in parallel to the (qualitative) consociational literature (see Bogaards 2013). There are obvious synergies

¹¹ The reasons given for this include the power of the parties, the collegial nature of cabinet government, the “orthodox liberal suspicion towards the accumulation of power”, the institutionalized structure of political challengers to those who hold power, the uneasiness about political inequality, and Britain’s historical reactions to European fascism (Foley 2013: 11-13).

in bringing these literatures together, but this is best done by appreciating the different origins and attributes of the concepts of power sharing and consociationalism.¹² Thus, when Strøm et al. (2017: 171) claim that their measure of inclusive power sharing covers “two of Lijphart’s components of consociationalism: grand coalitions and the mutual veto” this should be read with two reservations. First, at best their new global dataset on political power sharing institutions contains information on half of the consociational package. Second, their focus on formal institutions leaves out informal institutions. Although they do consider implementation of *de jure* rules, they do not capture consociational elements that are not formalized. As the analysis of formal and informal consociational institutions in Lebanon shows (Bogaards 2019a), this matters a great deal.¹³

Walsh (2019: 3) urges the consociational literature to go beyond case studies, including large-N statistical studies, though she notes the “limited universe of power-sharing cases”. Cases of power sharing, in fact, are not rare and they have been studied quantitatively (see Bogaards 2013). Full-fledged cases of consociational democracy, on the other hand, are indeed limited, making it hard to share O’Leary’s optimism (2013b: 410), who has “little doubt that better large-N work can be done in the future”. The difficulties of doing large-N research on consociations are clearly exposed in the few studies that intend to do so. When Reynal-Querol (2002: 52) finds that “consociational democracy is a political system that significantly reduces the incidence of ethnic civil war”, she refers to the combination of a proportional electoral system and a parliamentary form of government. When Selway and Templeman (2012: 1543) seek to expose the “myth of consociationalism” and conclude that “some consociationalist choices are actually associated with more political violence in such societies”, they base this on an analysis of the role of the electoral system, form of government, and territorial organization of power (federal versus unitary).¹⁴ For at least three reasons, however, it is not helpful to think of these institutions as “consociational”. First, none has an intrinsic relation with diversity, as the socio-cultural foundation of consociational democracy (Bogaards 2000). Second, all these institutions have only an indirect and tentative relationship to the consociational principles they are meant to embody: grand coalition, proportionality, and segmental autonomy. A government accountable to parliament can be majoritarian. A proportional electoral system by itself can lead to the underrepresentation of key communities (Bogaards 2019b). Federal units may be designed in such a way as to prevent the organization of the main communities, as happened in Nigeria (Bogaards 2010). Third, the principle of a grand coalition is not confined to the national government, proportionality is not limited to elections, and segmental autonomy can be non-territorial. Finally, consociationalism is a package, not a menu, and trying to isolate the impact of its individual features comes at the risk of underestimating its joint effects.

Kelly (2019) presents the most systematic and conscientious attempt to measure consociationalism empirically. She uses Minorities at Risk (MAR) data (see Birnir 2018),

¹² For example, Bormann’s (2017: 141) analysis of the impact of ethnic power-sharing coalitions in authoritarian regimes on the prospects of democratization, though presented as a “complement” to consociational theory, is better appreciated as belonging to the still growing line of research based on the Ethnic Power Relations Dataset, which codes political inclusion of ethnic groups in national government and relates this to variables of interest, including civil war. For more information, see: <https://icr.ethz.ch/data/epr> [accessed: 30.10.2019].

¹³ Strøm et al.’s (2017: 172) dataset also includes “dispersive power sharing”, which the authors link to Lijphart’s notion of segmental autonomy, though it leaves out non-territorial autonomy and their measure of federalism imperfectly captures territorial autonomy.

¹⁴ Wilson (2019) presents his more nuanced findings under the title of “the limits of consociationalism”.

among others, to identify grand coalitions and segmental autonomy, an existing data set on electoral systems to code for proportionality, and admits to serious problems with finding indicators for the mutual veto. This exercise leaves her with only five cases of consociationalism around the world between 1975 and 1995: Belgium, Switzerland, Madagascar (1993-1995), Nigeria (1980-1983), and South Africa (1995). If the conditions are relaxed, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, India, Lebanon, and Malaysia can be added, though in most of these cases, only for very brief spells, sometimes only one year (India 1975). It is clear, therefore, that despite her best efforts, Kelly's attempt to identify consociations using indicators from existing data sets results in a list of cases that bears little resemblance to those from the qualitative literature, thereby invalidating from the start the attempt to explore statistically the relationship between consociation and stability, which was the point of her enterprise.

Conclusion

Lustick (1997: 108) saw the consociational research program in a late-Lakatosian state, having sacrificed its duty of analytical rigor for the “evangelical prescription of consociationalism for most if not all politically troubled societies”. Now, more than ever, consociationalism is embraced as a normative model, even though “political scientists tend to be very cautious about making policy recommendations – much too cautious” (Lijphart 2018: 4). Many scholars have recommended consociationalism for their plural societies. In the past five years, and only looking at articles included in the Web of Science, this includes South Sudan (Onditi et al. 2018), Ukraine (Marlin 2016), Syria (Groarke 2016), Israel/Palestine (Dahbour 2016), and Myanmar (Kipgen 2014). Another good example of the popularity of consociationalism as an option for post-conflict societies is the edited volume on “Post-Conflict Power-Sharing Agreements: Options for Syria” (Salamey et al. 2018). Some scholars have not shied away from a more personal commitment. O’Leary and McGarry, the two most prolific contemporary scholars of consociationalism, openly identify as a “consociationalist” (McGarry 2019a) and as a consociational “advocate” (O’Leary 2013a, 2013b) respectively. We are very happy that both contributed to this special issue, McGarry (2019b) with an article examining the conditions under which consociationalism is successful, and O’Leary (2019) with a concluding critical review.

In his broad-ranging survey of comparative politics, Roberts (2019) asked scholars whether “consociationalism is the best available solution to ethnic conflict”. He finds that respondents are “just about evenly divided” (Roberts 2019: 11), with 29 per cent agreeing, 36 per cent disagreeing, and another 36 per cent neither agreeing nor disagreeing. For Roberts (*ibid.*), this “unfortunate result” reveals “a lack of agreement on a solution to intrastate ethnic conflict”. On the other hand, the fact that almost one third of US-based political scientists unconditionally agrees with the statement that consociationalism is not simply *a* solution, but *the best* solution to ethnic conflict shows that fifty years after its introduction, consociationalism is now the default option for divided societies.¹⁵ Since the most critical voices of consociationalism have traditionally come from scholars working in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, this is a surprisingly strong endorsement. We thus have come a long way from the pessimism about the prospects of democracy in plural societies that characterized comparative politics in the 1960s and early 1970s.

¹⁵ This consensus is not as strong among younger scholars, though (Roberts 2019: 13).

What is even more impressive is the spectacular upsurge of consociationalism research since the turn to the twenty-first century. Writing about consociationalism in the late 1990s, Lustick (1997: 108) perceived “a general slackening of interest in the idea” (Lustick 1997: 113). As we saw, if this was ever true, it is certainly not so any longer. New generations of scholars have enriched the international consociational research agenda through their committed interest in previously neglected topics; they have expanded the boundaries of the consociational universe at both the national and subnational level; and they have identified new challenges. Thus, there can be no doubt that, half a century after its inception, the consociational research agenda is more alive than ever.

Acknowledgments

As most special issues with an extensive agenda and an international cast, this collection of specifically commissioned and carefully refereed papers has a long history. This one’s journey started in earnest with an official submission of a proposal to the SPSR in late 2016. While the very first ideas were launched by Ludger Helms and Matt Qvortrup, all later stages were directed by Matthijs Bogaards and Ludger Helms who had the privilege to perform as guest-editors of this special issue. Over the course of those three years, the guest-editors had countless opportunities to marvel at the smooth professionalism of the SPSR editors that deserves to be characterized as exceptional by any standard. We feel particularly indebted to Professor Thomas Widmer, the SPSR’s current editor-in-chief, and Dr Daniela Eberli, the journal’s editorial assistant, for their unwavering support. Thanks are also due to Professor Adrian Vatter, the journal’s former chief editor, who encouraged us to submit a proposal for a special issue on consociationalism in the first place. Last not least, we would like to thank our contributors to this special issue for their commitment and patience, and the some 30 referees that have been involved in producing the very best possible collection of papers on contemporary consociationalism. The guest-editors would like to dedicate this collection to Professor Arend Lijphart, the unchallenged doyen of consociationalism research—in deep gratitude for inspiring more than one generation of scholars worldwide to think differently about conflict and consensus in politics.

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Matthijs Bogaards is currently visiting professor in the Department of Political Science at the Central European University in Budapest, Hungary. His research interests include democracy in divided societies, political institutions, regime change, and terrorism. He has published widely on a variety of topics in comparative politics: Visbogaards@ceu.edu.

Ludger Helms is Professor of Political Science and Chair of Comparative Politics at the University of Innsbruck. His research interests focus on comparative political institutions, political elites, and executive politics and leadership. He is the author of some 150 scholarly publications in those fields: ludger.helms@uibk.ac.at.

Arend Lijphart Research Professor Emeritus of Political Science at the University of California, San Diego. His research has focused on the prospects of democracy in ethnically divided societies like Belgium, Lebanon, South Africa, and India, and on different forms of democracy—especially the contrast between majoritarian and consensus democracy and between presidential and parliamentary systems—and their strengths and weaknesses: alijphart@ucsd.edu.