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CONSOCIATIONALISM AS A MINIMAL BENCHMARK FOR NORMATIVE THEORY

Andrej A. SEMENOV[1]
Zoran D. NEDELJKOVIĆ[2]
University of Priština in Kosovska Mitrovica
Faculty of Philosophy
Department of Sociology
Kosovska Mitrovica (Serbia)

[1] andrej.semenov@pr.ac.rs; https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8493-7209
[2] zoran.nedeljkovic@pr.ac.rs; https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5071-8892

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Abstract. This article argues that consociationalism, an instrument for managing deeply divided societies, can also be understood as a form of minimal normative political theory. Drawing on Arend Lijphart's consociational model of democracy and juxtaposing it with the heavyweight theoretical models of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, the article presents the model not merely as a functional compromise but as a morally grounded framework suited to contexts of deep pluralism and mistrust. Lijphart's consociational model is a morally grounded framework founded on three principles: coexistence without resolution (pluralism), peace as a precondition for justice, and institutional design as a moral choice. In this light, the model can serve as a minimal benchmark of what counts as a normative theory.

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Introduction

In political philosophy, normative legitimacy occupies a notable space: whether in the form of Rawls' principles of justice, Habermas' discourse ethics, or republican ideals, most normative theories assume a reasonable, cohesive political community capable of moral consensus. However, in a significant number of post-conflict and deeply divided societies, *stabilitocracy* in the form of mutual recognition and coexistence often outweighs the pursuit of ideal justice. So, what happens when this assumption no longer holds? Consociationalism, although widely contested, remains the most influential model for institutional design in deeply divided societies. Championed by Arend Lijphart (1977, 2008), consociationalism is fundamentally a method of elite accommodation that ensures peace through grand coalitions, proportionality, segmental autonomy, and veto rights. Without going into technicalities or subtle changes in the long history of the model, consociationalism is typically considered an instrument of political engineering—certainly not a form of political philosophy. Such a perception may miss a valuable dimension of the model: even as a non-ideal, context-sensitive arrangement, consociationalism relies on normative assumptions about justice, pluralism, and legitimacy. Thus, our goal is to place Lijphart's consociationalism between theories of justice and minimalist *realpolitik*, and to analyse it as a philosophical theory.

The article is organised as follows: in the first section, we introduce Lijphart's model of consociationalism. Admittedly, the discussion is brief and omits numerous valuable insights; however, we believe it is sufficient to support the central argument. Next, we examine the spectrum of normative theory to identify what constitutes a minimal benchmark for normative theorising. In the third section, we argue that consociationalism is simultaneously a model of political science (a widely accepted view) and a normative theory grounded in moral principles. Finally, we defend the position that consociationalism—as a form of minimal normative theory—not only has a legitimate place in the study of deeply divided societies, but may in fact be preferable to more ambitious moral theories.

Consociationalism

Consociationalism is generally divided into three main streams. The first two give preferential weight to institutional design and political traditions (e.g., Lorwin, 1975; Steiner, 1975). In contrast, our focus is on Lijphart's version, which prioritises the role of political elites. It is important to clarify that we do not suggest the other streams of consociationalism belong to the domain of political philosophy, as they remain within the scope of positive political science. Our argument is that Lijphart's model of consociational democracy qualifies as a form of normative political theory. As Semenov (2020, p. 383) points out, Lijphart's model "is rather about results than the procedure [thus] the Constitution [rules] is merely a tool for establishing the model but not an end in itself," and as such, it is not about any "particular institutional arrangement" but rather "the deliberate joint effort by the elites to stabilise the system" (Lijphart, 1969, p. 213).

Although it does not advocate for a particular institutional design, the model is anchored in the "universal participation" precondition (Lijphart, 2008). In addition to this requirement—that rights cannot be granted unilaterally to the other group—Lijphart's model of consociationalism contains four core attributes. First, a grand coalition, which requires leaders of divided groups to jointly govern the territory through either a "complete" consociation or a "proper grand" coalition. In the former, all relevant parties form a government with no opposition (e.g., Northern Ireland), while in the latter, government formation is left to post-election bargaining among parties (e.g., Bosnia and Herzegovina). Second, the constitutional framework envisages a mutual veto mechanism that prevents the dominant group from exercising power over the rival group. Third, the principle of proportionality guarantees not only political representation but also the allocation of resources. Finally, segmental autonomy is granted, typically in territorial form, but it may also be cultural or religious. The success of elite accommodation, however, depends on four elements:

> "(1) The elites have the ability to accommodate the divergent interests and demands of the subcultures. (2) This requires that they have the ability to transcend cleavages and to join in a common effort with the elites of rival subcultures. (3) This in turn depends on their commitment to the maintenance of the system and to the improvement of its cohesion and stability. (4) Finally, all of the above requirements are based on the assumption that the elites understand the perils of political fragmentation." (Lijphart, 1969, p. 216)

While Lijphart's model gained popularity, mostly due to its practical successes, it has also prompted a fair share of criticism over the past 50 years. These counter-arguments can be roughly divided into two groups.[4] First, the model fails

[4] Admittedly, this division does not do full justice to consociationalism or its critics; however, we employ it merely to illustrate the tension.

to address the causal direction of the phenomenon (Boynton & Kwon, 1978)—that is, which comes first: elite accommodation or institutions? Second, there is little possibility of predicting cooperation between elites, as they might opt to manipulate outcomes for their own benefit (Horowitz, 1991, 2004). While no definitive resolutions have been reached in these debates, consociationalism remains as relevant and divisive as it was in previous decades (see Bogaards, 2019; Bogaards et al., 2019). Therefore, the value of consociationalism lies not in its ossified theoretical structure but in its capacity to identify legitimacy in deeply divided societies. In other words, the model is a compelling candidate for what we call a "minimal benchmark" in normative theory: a framework that does not seek justice as fairness, but rather survival as justice. To fully understand its potential in this role, we must first discuss what normative theory is, and where consociationalism might fit along its spectrum.

From Ideal to Minimal: The Spectrum of Normative Theory

At the very heart of political philosophy lies the question: "How do we live our best lives within the community?" To answer such a query, we engage in "[n]ormative thinking [which] typically invokes principles with respect to how we should conduct and organise ourselves; as such, it seeks to provide 'norms' that prescribe appropriate ways of acting individually and collectively" (Buckler, 2010, p. 156). In other words, we operate in the realm of ideal (or—at least—best-case) theory while confronting a very non-ideal reality. Within this tradition, several theories stand out as classic examples. John Rawls's (1999; Pogge, 2007) theory of justice invites us to imagine ourselves behind a veil of ignorance, where we know nothing about our individual traits, and whatever we agree to under those circumstances defines a just society. Jürgen Habermas (1990, 1996) calls for communicative rationality as the foundation of a just society, in which norms derive their validity from inclusive and undistorted deliberation among free and equal participants.

These theories aim high, perhaps too high even for functioning democracies, let alone deeply divided societies, as they articulate the conditions under which a political order would not only function, but do so justly. Yet such theories operate under the assumption of shared values, a certain level of mutual trust, and relatively stable institutions. Deeply divided societies, however, not only fail to meet these requirements but often appear a step or two away from even making them structurally possible. Political theorising in such settings must therefore abandon the pursuit of ideal outcomes in favour of minimal legitimacy—not what would be best, but what would be just enough to hold together a polity under strain. In this light, the consociational minimum is not an

escape into pragmatism, but a moral goal in certain circumstances because in the absence of shared values and mutual trust, even modest guarantees of peace and non-domination represent genuine justice.

While, as previously mentioned, not traditionally treated as political philosophy, Lijphart's model contains both prescriptive and evaluative dimensions. It does not merely describe what is, but also suggests what ought to be done under specific conditions: when societies are deeply divided along ethnic, linguistic, or religious lines. His four core principles are not mere techniques but represent normative judgments about what is just and sustainable when social fragmentation precludes integration. This is not to detract from consociationalism as a democratic form of power-sharing, but rather to shed new light: Lijphart's model may serve as a benchmark for normative theory. Although it is only in recent years that Lijphart's work has been recognised as having a prescriptive role, it seems he was sympathetic to this idea from an early stage: "[H]is message to political leaders and students of politics is to encourage them to participate in political engineering if they want to establish or strengthen democratic institutions in their countries" (Семенов, 2022, p. 353).

The Normative Logic of Consociationalism

Let us begin by unpacking the tension between two neighbouring fields—political science and political theory, or more precisely in our case, between the normative and the prescriptive. Political science is a positive science that answers the question "What is it?" Its subfield, policy analysis, is prescriptive in nature and addresses the question, "Given the circumstances, what should we do?" Political theory, on the other hand, aims to justify or evaluate certain social arrangements and asks, "What ought to be done?" For instance, normative theorists might argue that justice as fairness (Rawls) or rational discourse among equals (Habermas) ought to guide the basic structure of society, while a prescriptive policy analyst might argue that the government should adopt certain laws in order to operationalise those ideals. Therefore, policy analysis is practical and action-oriented, while political theory is theoretical and evaluative (cf. Scharding & Warren, 2024).

Going to the heart of the matter, we claim that consociationalism operates on a three-layered framework. When consociational research, based on comparative analyses of deeply divided societies, suggests that consociational arrangements can stabilise post-conflict societies, it operates within the field of political science. If the research then proposes that a certain society should guarantee ethnic veto powers and proportional representation in government to prevent domination by a single ethnic group, it adopts a prescriptive role within policy analysis. Finally, if the research justifies consociationalism as a means of

maintaining peace and building sustainable institutions, it assumes a normative-theoretical grounding.

Functioning within the three-layered framework reveals that consociationalism is fundamentally embedded in consociational thinking. Although often presented as a model operating in pragmatic terms, consociationalism draws upon deeper philosophical principles that legitimise its approach. These principles include: value pluralism (coexistence without resolution), peace as a precondition for justice, and institutional design as a moral choice. Value pluralism is based on the idea that certain values may sometimes take precedence over others, or that values may be equally valid yet incommensurable and conflicting (Berlin, 1961, 1969): liberty may clash with equality, identity with autonomy, justice with stability. Lijphart's model accepts this pluralism not as a temporary state but as a permanent condition of political life in divided societies. Rather than aiming to overcome these differences, it proposes their institutionalisation. In other words, consociationalism requires moral agreement, but reduces its depth.

The next normative assumption that stems from the model is that peace is not morally neutral, but a precondition for justice. While liberal and deliberative theories regard justice as the foremost virtue of institutional design, consociationalism takes peace as its point of departure. In deeply divided societies, the mechanism of power-sharing aims to prevent the worst outcomes such as repression, societal collapse, or renewed conflict. In other words, it creates and sustains a fragile but crucial pluralism. Finally, consociationalism contains the idea of institutional design as a moral act: the choice to include mutual vetoes, to ensure proportional representation, and to provide autonomy reflects moral judgments of fairness, inclusion, and legitimacy under pluralism. In this context, consociationalism is not merely a model of institutional arrangement in deeply divided societies but a political theory that recognises that perfect justice may be inaccessible in such settings, yet insists that some justice is still required, particularly justice as non-domination, as inclusion, and as dignity for groups whose coexistence is otherwise in jeopardy.

Why Minimal Still Matters

In political theory, minimalism is often equated with moral deficiency: the absence of grand normative ambition is treated as a sign of theoretical weakness or a concession to *realpolitik*. However, this line of reasoning rests on the assumption that ideal conditions are either available or achievable. In many societies, most notably those fractured by historical violence and deep identity cleavages, this assumption does not hold. It is in these contexts that a minimal normative theory like consociationalism not only has its place but becomes morally necessary.

One of the central assumptions of modern political theory is that justice demands more: more equality, more autonomy, more deliberation. It is our contention that, under specific circumstances such as those found in deeply divided societies, moral maximalism becomes counterproductive. True, consociationalism is normatively thin: it lacks the communicative infrastructure necessary for legitimacy and runs the risk of technocratic bargaining displacing genuine democratic discussion. As Mouffe (2005, p. 77) warns, "there is no consensus without exclusion, no 'we' without a 'they,' and no politics is possible without the drawing of a frontier." In other words, legitimacy without consensus does not pave the way to democratic agonism. However, where there is a risk that democratic agonism may turn into antagonism, the structured inclusion of rivals through elite agreement represents not technocracy, but a genuine form of democratic legitimacy—grounded not in consensus, but in institutionalised disagreement without existential threat. Consociationalism, therefore, is a triage model: it does not remedy democratic deficiencies but stabilises the system long enough to prevent collapse. Its legitimacy rests on non-exclusion, group recognition, and the prevention of domination.

It is important to note that, unlike Lijphart, we do not believe that consociationalism should be a permanent institutional arrangement in divided societies. Its normative justification rests on its capacity to stabilise fragile polities, not on its ability to provide a final democratic settlement. The long-term implication of coexistence without resolution is that intergroup conflict—or, more precisely, the domination of one group over another—may be replaced by elites dominating the groups they represent through perpetual bargaining with the other elite group (Papagianni, 2008). In other words, there is a risk that a mechanism designed to prevent domination between groups may entrench domination within them, leading to the "cartelisation" of politics (Kopecký, 2007).

By defending consociationalism as a minimal benchmark for normative theory, we expand our understanding of what counts as political philosophy. Not all legitimate theories must be transformative or utopian. Some, like consociationalism, express a politics of containment, restraint, and dignity within constraint. That this form of normativity is modest does not make it meaningless. Quite the contrary, in a world where deep pluralism is increasingly the rule rather than the exception, minimal theories may be more relevant (and more honest) than ever. In deeply divided societies, these goods may constitute the minimum content of political justice. By contrast, insisting on immediate integration, full deliberation, or identity transcendence may not only be unrealistic, but potentially morally irresponsible. As a benchmark for normativity, consociationalism reflects the ethics of what can be done when better cannot yet be achieved.

Conclusion

At first glance, proposing consociationalism as a form of normative political theory may seem, mildly said, counter-intuitive. After all, consociationalism is a model for its institutional pragmatism, not moral imagination. But this is precisely our point: in societies where grand normative ambitions collapse under the weight of deep division, it is often the modest, stabilising arrangements that carry the heaviest ethical burden.

Consociationalism, understood in this way, does not reject justice; rather, it redefines its threshold. In societies where pluralism is deep, trust is thin, and the threat of collapse is real, moral demands placed on political arrangements decrease. Therefore, justice, in such a setting, is not the quest for equality of opportunity or robust consensus, but the means to survive together without domination. Consociationalism is equipped to tackle this task by placing peace as a precondition for justice and treating institutional design as a moral choice. As a benchmark for minimal normativity, consociationalism may not inspire great changes, but it may prevent the worst outcomes. And in many corners of the world, that is no small moral achievement.

If we accept that consociationalism is a minimal normative framework, then other institutional designs—such as centripetalism or even ostensibly "technical" fixes like transitional power-sharing arrangements—may also deserve reconsideration as morally relevant. Therefore, a future comparison between consociationalism and centripetalism through the lenses of shared normative criteria would either refine the line of the minimal normative theory or shed light on tensions in our account of consociationalism.

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Андреј А. СЕМЕНОВ
Зоран Д. НЕДЕЉКОВИЋ

Универзитет у Приштини са привременим
седиштем у Косовској Митровици
Филозофски факултет
Катедра за социологију
Косовска Митровица (Србија)

Консоцијализам као минимални стандард нормативне политичке теорије

Резиме

Политичка теорија тежи да артикулише шта правда захтева под идеалним (или готово идеалним) условима. Међутим, у дубоко подељеним друштвима, где је сама структура заједничког грађанства упитна, такве тежње могу скренути пажњу са хитнијих питања: који облици политичког поретка су морално прихватљиви под ограничењима? Шта чини крхки мир нормативно одбрањивим када је консензус ван домашаја? Централни аргумент овог чланка је да консоцијализам, задржавајући свој примарни фокус (институционални инжењеринг), треба да буде препознат и као облик минималне нормативне теорије. Механизми консоцијализма – подела власти, међусобни вето, сегментна аутономија – одраз су не само прагматичног компромиса већ у себи садрже и морално резоновање утемељено у плурализму вредности, недоминацији и миру као неопходном предуслову за правду. Ваља признати да су критичари суштински у праву када указују на ограничења консоцијализма у погледу учвршћивања елите и демократског дефицита. Међутим, ова критика претпоставља да консоцијализам тежи да постигне исте идеале као либерална или делиберативна демократија. Сасвим супротно, овај рад показује да су амбиције консоцијализма далеко скромније, и управо ту лежи и његова снага – консоцијализам је погоднији у дубоко подељеним друштвима где теорије вишег реда доживљавају неуспехе. Дакле, уместо да одбацимо консоцијализам као постполитички или морално дефицитан, ми га препознајемо као теорију ограничене легитимности која даје приоритет инклузији и обуздавању конфликата у односу на трансформацију. Другим речима, у друштвима где постоји опасност од грађанског рата или ауторитарне доминације, минимални морал консоцијализма је не само одбрањив већ и неопходан. Преобликовањем консоцијализма као референтне тачке за нормативну теорију, проширујемо обим политичке филозофије како бисмо укључили неидеалне услове, али и постављамо тест политичкој теорији који нам говори како изгледа праведно друштво онда када правда мора почети са преживљавањем.

Кључне речи: консоцијализам; Аренд Лајпхарт; правда и мир; минимална нормативност; нормативна теорија.