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Northern Ireland is often described as a deeply divided society, and this was most evident during the Troubles, a low-level war that spanned over three decades. One of the main themes throughout the Troubles was how to end the conflict and create a lasting peace Unionists and Nationalists would accept. The two main peace agreements, the Sunningdale Agreement and the Good Friday Agreement, followed a consociational model to ensure the peace process and resulting government would be agreeable to both sides. This model has been used in other deeply divided societies such as Belgium to ensure a stable, democratic government where persistent cleavages exist (Taylor, 2009: 3). Lijphart is one of the main scholars of consociationalism, and his four main principles of consociational governments as well as his criteria for a successful consociational government illuminate how the peace process was influenced by his theories. The Sunningdale Agreement reflects three out of four of Lijphart’s rules for consociationalism while the Good Friday Agreement includes all four. Furthermore, Northern Ireland exhibits four of the six requirements for a successful consociational government, therefore it is obvious that consociationalism was and continues to be important in maintaining peace.

Democratic countries approach political partisanship through two routes: integration or accommodation. Most democracies prefer integration by discouraging parties that form around ethnicity or religion and encouraging intersectional parties (McGarry and O’Leary, 2009: 16) such as the Labour Party or Conservative Party in Britain. These two parties do not represent a religion or ethnicity but rather diverge on social and economic issues. Limited democracies in the world subscribe to accommodation through different methods including consociationalism (ibid: 17). Consociationalism instead of integration is important when two assumptions underlying majoritarian governments do not stand: the minority group can become the majority group in the next election and that society is homogenous so the minority is still represented by the majority government (Lijphart, 1985: 7). The four main tenants of consociational governments are power-sharing within the executive, autonomy for minority group affairs, proportional representation, and a minority veto (Lijphart, 1985: 6). Powering-sharing within the executive allows the representation of minority views creating a more democratic society compared to a majoritarian government. Furthermore, in a deeply divided society the political stakes are high for all legislation, therefore a majoritarian government can threaten the peace because only one party makes decisions (Lijphart, 1997: 28). Autonomy over the minority community’s affairs also allows the group to maintain power within the governmental structure and can be a stimulus for cooperation in government (ibid: 41). Proportional representation gives minority groups increased political efficacy and prevents a majoritarian government from repressing the minority groups. It also refers to the proportional allocation of public funds, civil servant positions, and policing forces. The last main part of consociational governments, the minority veto, Lijphart describes as “the ultimate weapon that minorities need to protect their interests” (1985: 8). The veto helps minorities protect their most important interests, but it is used sparingly because the veto can be used to hurt other groups (ibid: 8).

Lijphart identifies multiple balances of power, small country size, cross-group loyalties, cross-cutting cleavages, isolation of the groups, and a tradition of accommodation within the elite political class as being conducive to the creation of consociational governments (Lijphart, 1997: 54). A society with multiple balances of power helps foster a successful consociational government because it prevents a majority from forming, but a dual balance of power encourages leaders to form a majority instead of cooperating with the minority in government (ibid: 55). A smaller country has fewer minority groups and interests, encourages cooperation and accommodation, and reduces the number of decisions to be made in government making the country easier to govern (ibid: 65). Loyalties that are overarching help mitigate the intensity of feelings towards the predominate cleavages (ibid: 81). Cross cutting cleavages work similarly to overarching loyalties to help decrease the intensity of feelings generated by the predominate cleavages and moderate the actions and attitudes of groups (ibid: 75). Isolation of each group geographically also reduces the chance of antagonism between groups from spilling into violence (ibid: 100). Finally, elite accommodation is important to create a new political system, but leaders must maintain the support of their followers (ibid: 100). Elites are also often pressured by a foreign threat or influence to cooperate during the process of creating a consociational government (ibid: 67). Lijphart explains a country does not need to fulfil every requirement, but these are common elements in consociational governments (ibid: 54).

Since the beginning of the Troubles, the British have proposed power-sharing, one of the main tenants of consociationalism, as a possible solution and both the Sunningdale Agreement and Good Friday Agreement focus on this idea. The Sunningdale Agreement also includes the principle that Northern Ireland would remain part of the United Kingdom if the majority want to be under British rule. It also created the Council of Ireland which would allow the Irish and Northern Irish governments to cooperate on issues and a Unionist minority veto to keep this council in check (Bew, 2007, 512). The agreement stated cooperation could occur in fields such as tourism and roads, but the Northern Irish and Irish governments would decide which areas there would be cooperation on later (1973 The Sunningdale Agreement). The ambiguous nature of the Council of Ireland raised the hopes of Nationalists to establish a united Ireland and consequently scared Unionists. For this reason, as well as the general lack of support among the elites and the public, the Sunningdale Agreement failed.

Then, in 1998, the Good Friday Agreement was created which includes many of the same themes found in the Sunningdale Agreement. It establishes a North-South Ministerial Council much like the Council of Ireland, but with defined areas of cooperation. These issues include food, trade, business development, and education among many others. It consists of premiers nominated by both the Irish government and Northern Irish government and is required to meet at least twice per year. It also establishes a West-East dimension with the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference which allows Ireland and Britain to collaborate on Northern Irish affairs not devolved to Stormont. The British-Irish Council was also established which gives all devolved governments within the United Kingdom as well as the Irish government the opportunity to collaborate on issues (McGarry and O’Leary, 2009: 32). One of the key aspects that also remained from the Sunningdale Agreement was the commitment to Britain maintaining control of Northern Ireland if the majority want to remain part of the United Kingdom (ibid: 33). Other important aspects of the agreement included reforming the electoral system, and, shortly after the agreement, reforming the police (ibid: 33).

Concessions were made on both sides of the political divide. Unionists accepted the IRA would not be punished to the extent many hoped for, and there would be a release of prisoners, a change in the policing system, and a decommissioning process. In return the IRA eventually stopped its violence, and the Irish government relinquished its claim to Northern Ireland in its constitution. Unionists also had to accept the end of their political hegemony in favour of a reformed electoral system focused on power-sharing and cross-border cooperation. In return, Unionists gained the assurance that Northern Ireland would stay under the control of Britain and this would be acknowledged by Nationalists and the Irish (Bew, 2007: 549). The IRA also agreed to a cessation of violence to allow Sinn Fein, the political wing of the Nationalists, a voice during the talks (Guelke, 2009: 100). These concessions were facilitated by the political elite and cooperation among the elite had been occurring since the 1980s with John Hume and Gerry Adams to create a successful peace agreement (Gormley-Heenan, 2006: 1).

Lijphart describes how consociational government works best when two majoritarian ideas fail: the minority can be tomorrow’s majority and the minority is still generally represented by the majority. In Northern Ireland, Nationalists and Catholics are a minority, therefore they could not gather enough support to become the majority (Taylor, 2009: 8). Furthermore, Nationalists faced discrimination from the Unionist controlled government before the Troubles began, so as a minority, Nationalists were not represented by the majority during this time. This was evident in the gerrymandering of local councils to increase the number of Unionist representatives and depress the number of Nationalists elected (Whyte, 1983). Therefore, a consociational government was preferable to a majoritarian in Northern Ireland because a majoritarian government had helped foster the problems that led to the Troubles

The Sunningdale Agreement reflected a consociational model because it incorporated three of Lijphart four main elements of consociational governments. It established power-sharing, a veto, and a proportional representative system in elections. This veto was for Unionists which some might argue is not a minority group, but a double minority complex exists in Northern Ireland meaning both groups feel like threatened, marginalised groups (Whyte 1990, 100). Unionists are a minority within the island of Ireland, therefore this could be considered a minority veto because the veto was over decisions made by the Council of Ireland. The agreement also established a power-sharing system with proportional representation to accurately distribute votes for the Northern Ireland Assembly, but it also gave Westminster the rights over many key areas in law and order (1973 The Sunningdale Agreement). Therefore, the Sunningdale Agreement reflected Lijphart’s consociational model by establishing a minority veto, a power-sharing government, and proportional representation.

The Good Friday Agreement was much more developed than the Sunningdale Agreement and reflects a more accurate consociational model than the Sunningdale Agreement. Power-sharing occurs in every direction. There is power-sharing between Britain, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and the United Kingdom through the North-South Ministerial Council, British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, and the British-Irish Council. Within the Northern Irish government, power-sharing exists at the executive level because a First Minister and Deputy First Minister from each group, Unionist and Nationalist, is elected (English, 2003: 298). One of the problems Lijphart identified with power-sharing was if a dual power-sharing system emerged. This was inbuilt into the agreement by identifying the two groups as Unionist and Nationalist. Therefore, the Good Friday Agreement ignores Lijphart recommendation to avoid this in consociational governments. One of the other key elements, a minority veto, is also part of the Good Friday Agreement because both Unionists and Nationalists can use the veto in the Assembly.

A proportional representative system was also established through a single transferable vote system and the d’Hondt method for appointing ministers in the Assembly both of which attempt to proportionally represent each party (Wolff, 2009: 111-112). Also, Lijphart describes how public and civil offices and funds must be allocated proportionally. This was attempted during the peace process by rebranding the police force from the Royal Ulster Constabulary to the Police Service of Northern Ireland. The symbols were changed and the force recruits Catholics to end the overly represented Protestant makeup of the police force (McGarry and O’Leary, 2009: 33). Furthermore, in the Good Friday Agreement employment equality and anti-discrimination measures were implemented (Northern Ireland Office 1998 The Belfast Agreement). The last element of consociational governments, group autonomy, is the least represented in the peace process. It is not discussed at all in the Sunningdale Agreement and is not clearly defined in the Good Friday Agreement. The only segmental autonomy that exists today in Northern Ireland is schooling because Catholics and Protestants generally send their children to schools that align with their religions and therefore have some autonomy over schooling (Coakley, 2009: 124).

Lijphart also identified many elements that foster a consociational government including multiple balances of power, small country size, cross-cutting group loyalties, cross-cutting cleavages, isolation of the groups, and a tradition of accommodation within the elite political class (1997: 54). Northern Ireland does not exhibit multiple balances of power, cross-cutting group loyalties or cross-cutting cleavages; but it does exhibit a small country size, isolation of the groups, and a tradition of accommodation. As is obvious from the Good Friday Agreement, Unionists and Nationalists create a dual balance of power which continues today in creating issues for the Northern Irish government. A government has not been formed for weeks in Stormont because there are not multiple balances of power, but instead the two main parties representing Nationalists and Unionists, Sinn Fein and DUP, have been unable to come to an agreement to create a government (BBC, 2017). This dual power balance prevents the consociational government from being as effective as it could be. Over-arching loyalties also do not exist in the Northern Irish peace process because one of the most common over-arching loyalties in other countries using consociational governments is nationalism. Nationalists and Unionists identify with different nationalities, Irish and British respectively, so this does not unite the two groups nor help the establishment of a consociational government. Cross-cutting cleavages are also absent from the peace process in Northern Ireland. In fact, overlapping cleavages existed during the peace process because most Unionists identify as Protestant and most Nationalists identify as Catholic. Culture and language can also be overlapping cleavages with Unionists identifying with Ulster Scots and Britishness and Nationalists identifying with Irish and Gaelic culture (Wolff, 2009: 111).

One element contributing to a consociational government is Northern Ireland being a small statelet, but interestingly, Lijphart wrote that the area was too small for consociationalism to work well (ibid: 139). Even so, it fulfils the criteria of a small country with theoretically fewer governmental issues. There was also isolation of the groups geographically and culturally during the Troubles and afterwards. Cities are largely self-segregated and certain towns in the countryside are known as more Catholic or Protestant. Elite accommodation was also present because the leaders chose to end the campaigns of violence in favour of a political solution (Guelke, 2009: 101). Furthermore, the concessions made on both sides would not have been possible without the political elite willing to make them, therefore elite accommodation facilitated the peace process. Also, Lijphart describes how international pressure can create consociational governments, and the United States played a large role in the peace process through pressuring Thatcher to sign it, sending a delegation to help with negotiations, and giving Northern Irish political leaders access to the White House (McGarry and O’Leary, 2009: 39).

The peace process in Northern Ireland in many ways follows Lijphart four main components of consociational governments by incorporating power-sharing, a minority veto, some autonomy for Unionists and Nationalists, and proportional representation. The process does not follow every rule for a favourable condition for consociational governments, but not every condition must be met for this type of government to succeed. Northern Ireland exhibits a small state, an accommodating elite, and isolation of the two groups but not multiple balances of power, cross-cutting cleavages, or over-arching loyalties. Even so, today Northern Ireland is looked to as one of the most successful consociational governments because this type of peace transformed a society embroiled in violent conflict into a peaceful and functional democracy. There continue to be issues with the governmental system which is evident with the current inability to form a government, but today government is more democratic and inclusive than ever before in Northern Ireland.

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