Concept

Consociationalism

Definition

Consociationalism is a form of democracy which seeks to regulate the sharing of power in a state that comprises diverse societies (distinct ethnic, religious, national or linguistic groups), by allocating these groups collective rights. The executive-power sharing is mainly characterized by proportional representation, veto rights and segmental autonomy for minority groups.

In recent years, it has become a major demand of Israeli Arabs.

Background

Consociationalism stands in contrast to the concept of 'majoritarian democracy.'¹ Majoritarian systems call for the integration of minority groups and the distribution of individual rights solely. However, the consociationalist approach consists in accommodating minorities, by granting them collective rights.

There are four characteristics of Consociationalism:²

- **Executive power-sharing** – forming a 'grand coalition' with leaders representing all significant segments of society. The institutional expression of the 'grand coalition' is a multi-party cabinet.³

- **Mutual Veto** – giving groups within a state the right to veto the government's decision-making. It will thus be necessary to reach mutual agreement among all parties in the executive.⁴

- **Proportional Representation** – enabling groups to be a part of the state's decision-making and to have their voice heard in the highest instances of policy-making.

- **Segmental Autonomy** – giving minority groups the possibility for self-rule within the boundaries of the state.

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¹ "Majoritarian democracies … typically have first-past-the-post electoral systems, only two major political parties, single-party cabinets, unicameralism, and unitary and centralized government." (Mainwaring, S., "Two Models of Democracy," *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 12, Number 3, July 2001, pp. 170-175.)


³ In Switzerland, the executive powers are shared among seven members of the national executive, according to the 'magic formula': 2-2-2-1. Thus all linguistic groups are given representation in proportions to their size. (Sitnikov, A., *Consociational Democracy*, Published in Stanford University. [Click here.])

⁴ The Netherlands, Belgium and Austria are examples of established democracies, "with plural societies containing distinct ethnic communities divided by language, religion, and region, with constitutions characterized by multiple veto-points and extensive power-sharing." (Norris, P., *Ethnic Pluralism and Consociational Democracy Revisited*, Paper presentation at the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, September 2005, p.3-4).
Rather than having a particular structure, Consociationalism could take different forms in different places, and the division of power between the central government and the autonomous political units varies.

"Consociational arrangements, …need not be comprehensive: they may be confined to distinct constitutional and policy sectors (in the domain of the politics of identity, recognition, and constitutional change); or they may be applied piecemeal where they are deemed necessary. They need not be mechanically applied throughout the entirety of politics." (O'Leary, B., Debating Consociational Politics, Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, August 03, p.19.) For full article, click here.

See also: Lijphart, A., Typologies of Democratic Systems, Comparative Political Studies, Volume 1, Sage Journals Publications, April 1968, pp. 3-44.

Or any other type of quasi-autonomous region, e.g. cantons in Switzerland. For more details on the distinctions between types and dimensions of democracy, click here.