

2019

## Deliberation and Consociation: Joint Pathways to Peace in Divided Societies

Arend Lijphart

University of California, San Diego, [alijphart@ucsd.edu](mailto:alijphart@ucsd.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd>



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Lijphart, Arend (2019) "Deliberation and Consociation: Joint Pathways to Peace in Divided Societies," *Journal of Public Deliberation*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 3 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol15/iss3/art10>

This Reflections from the Field is brought to you for free and open access by Public Deliberation. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Public Deliberation by an authorized editor of Public Deliberation.

---

## Deliberation and Consociation: Joint Pathways to Peace in Divided Societies

### Abstract

In this short commentary, Arend Lijphart continues the conversation on the role of deliberation in promoting the “spirit of accommodation” in deeply divided societies. Jürg Steiner and Maria Clara Jaramillo started this discussion in their article “How to Arrive at Peace in Deeply Divided Societies? Using Deliberation to Refine Consociational Theory” published in this same issue.

## **Deliberation and Consociation: Joint Pathways to Peace in Divided Societies**

### **Introduction**

I am very happy to have the opportunity to comment on Jürg Steiner and Maria Clara Jaramillo's excellent article "How to Arrive at Peace in Deeply Divided Societies? Using Deliberation to Refine Consociational Theory." I fully agree with Steiner and Jaramillo that deliberative democratic theory is a valuable addition to consociational theory and strengthens its practical application. In my own early work, especially in my 1968 book on Dutch politics, I wrote of the "spirit of accommodation" that supported its successful consociation. This spirit is indeed akin to the concept of deliberation. In later works, I also emphasized the importance of already existing traditions of compromise and accommodation that are likely to strengthen the operation of consociational institutions. But I clearly did not develop these concepts in the way that deliberation theorists have successfully done in the past several decades.

### **On Political Leadership**

While I therefore find myself in general agreement with Steiner and Jaramillo, we do differ with regard to some matters of detail and emphasis. The most important of these is that my emphasis has been on the political leaders, instead of ordinary people, who deal with each other in the spirit of accommodation. Teaching deliberative skills to schoolchildren is a promising method to foster more cordial relations among groups in divided societies, but such improved relations can also be achieved as the longer-term effect of elite-level accommodation. The examples of the Netherlands and Austria, where consociationalism dissipated after the 1960s, show that it was no longer necessary after ordinary people had learned not to have to fear the "other side" and that peaceful coexistence was working well. In terms of political praxis, there is no reason not to try both approaches, but if accommodation at the elite level is possible, it is likely to be more realistic in the short run than the time-consuming task of teaching children (and perhaps their parents) to become more mutually understanding.

I also have a somewhat different take on rational choice theory. Although I am not a rational choice theorist, I think that the early examples of consociational solutions to situations of great tension and potential or even actual violence—such as in the Netherlands in 1917, Lebanon in 1943, Austria in 1945, Malaysia in 1955, Colombia in 1958, and Belgium in 1970—show that it was the leaders' rational recognition of these dangers that led them to look for accommodative solutions. In these cases, their individual self-interests and the common interest were not in conflict with each other: the common interest of preserving or restoring domestic peace was also in their own "selfish" interest.

What is also striking in the cases above is that the leadership decisions were made completely independently of each other. They were not inspired by the example of an earlier agreement of this kind; each time, consociational solutions were re-invented. In this respect, the chances of power sharing have improved significantly because the consociational model has become widely known. It has played an important practical role in the 1990s and 2000s in the design of constitutions and other governing instruments in Northern Ireland, South Africa, Fiji, Burundi,

Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Iraq—not very successfully in all cases, of course. In the successful case of South Africa, I introduced the idea of consociationalism in 1971, and I had many conversations about its potential with politicians of the ruling White-minority party in the years after 1971. They tended to respond to my proposal by saying: “We appreciate your idea, but we think it is too risky.” My answer was always the same: “You think it is too risky, because you think you have the choice between sharing power and maintaining exclusive white power. You are wrong: your choice is between sharing power and losing power.” It was the recognition of this reality that finally led then President F. W. de Klerk to free Nelson Mandela from prison in 1990 and to negotiate a power-sharing solution with him. Both the availability of a model solution and rationality were crucial factors. I hasten to add a third crucially important factor: the deliberative skills of the two main negotiating partners, especially Mandela’s.

### **Deliberation and Power-Sharing Institutions**

My ultimate conclusion is, first, that both a culture of deliberation and power-sharing institutions are necessary ingredients for achieving peace in plural societies, and, second, that they can and should interact with each other. As Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba (1963, p. 35) write in their classic study of *The Civic Culture*, structural and cultural phenomena are variables in “a complex, multidirectional system of causality.” Steiner and Jaramillo’s description of the interaction of deliberation and power-sharing institutions in Switzerland is a perfect illustration. However, because this process took more than a century, it is also exceptional and therefore has limited practical applicability to contemporary divided societies that cannot afford to wait so long. If remedies are needed urgently, as in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, it makes sense to me that the 1995 Dayton Accord gave priority to creating power-sharing institutions. It failed not only because too little attention was paid to the cultural dimension, but also because the new consociational rules and institutions were too rigid: in particular, the excessive number of veto points, resulting in deadlock and stagnation, and also the strict and inflexible classification of citizens in purely ethnic terms. Such rigidity was also a root cause of the failure of the Cyprus consociation in 1963 and the Lebanese consociation in 1975.

In terms of the practical use of consociational theory, institutional-oriented consociationalists like myself have made several strong and important general recommendations: use a parliamentary form of government and avoid presidential government; use proportional representation, not majority elections; make only limited use of veto powers; and use federalism to give autonomy to geographically concentrated minorities. But more precise work along these lines clearly remains to be done.

### **Reference**

Almond, G. A., & Verba, S. (1963). *The civic culture: Political attitudes and democracy in five nations*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.