

Cracks in the Mosaic

A Comparative Case Study of the State of
Consociationalism in Belgium and Switzerland

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Abstract

Fifty-five years have passed since Lijphart's introduction of the consociational model of democracy, which uses elite cooperation to manage conflict in divided societies. Through a comparative case study of the application of consociationalism in the classic cases of Belgium and Switzerland with a focus on the key characteristics of grand coalition, segmental autonomy, and public passivity, the model's continued relevance is examined. The analysis indicates that the two cases still exhibit consociational features, but identifies challenges to the application of the model with regard to government composition, secessionist parties, and the use of direct-democratic referendums. The findings raise questions about Lijphart's universal recommendations of the model and the future of consociationalism in relation to the upsurge in populism and democratic backsliding.

Keywords: consociationalism, Belgium, Switzerland, comparative case study

Word count: 9,463

List of Abbreviations

Agalev	<i>Anders gaan leven</i> ('Start living differently')
BDP	Conservative Democratic Party of Switzerland
CDH	<i>Centre démocrate humaniste</i> (Humanist Democratic Centre)
CD&V	<i>Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams</i> (Christian Democratic and Flemish)
CVP	Christian Democratic People's Party of Switzerland
Ecolo	<i>Écologistes Confédérés pour l'organisation de luttes originales</i> (Confederate Ecologists for the Organisation of Original Struggles)
FDP	The Liberals/Radicals
GLP	Green Liberal Party of Switzerland
GPS	Green Party of Switzerland
MR	<i>Mouvement Réformateur</i> (Reformist Movement)
N-VA	<i>Nieuw-Vlaams Alliantie</i> (New Flemish Alliance)
Open VLD	<i>Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten</i> (Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats)
PS	<i>Parti socialiste</i> (Socialist Party)
SP	Social Democratic Party of Switzerland
SP.A	<i>Socialistische Partij Anders</i> (Socialist Party Differently)
VB	<i>Vlaams Belang</i> (Flemish Interest)
SVP	Swiss People's Party/Democratic Union of the Centre
VLD	<i>Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten</i> (Flemish Liberals and Democrats)

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Can democracy and political stability prevail in divided societies? “Yes,” was Arend Lijphart’s response to the otherwise pessimistic research on the topic at the time (Lijphart, 1977, p. 3). “[I]t may be *difficult*, but it is not at all *impossible* to achieve and maintain stable democratic government in a plural society,” he wrote in the introductory chapter of his 1977 monograph which explores the concept of *consociational democracy*¹ (Lijphart, 1977, p. 1). In the book, aptly named *Democracy in Plural Societies*, Lijphart points to four European countries that, despite being categorised as ‘plural’,² had developed a stable and democratic political culture: Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Switzerland (Lijphart, 1977, pp. 1, 25–103). These countries have become known as the ‘classic cases’ of consociationalism (McGarry, 2019, p. 538).

Since Lijphart’s introduction of the concept of consociationalism in academia, it has played a significant role in understanding both democratisation and democratic consolidation in divided societies and is highly regarded by a plethora of scholars. Bogaards et al. (2019, p. 350) write in a literature review that “consociationalism is now the default option for divided societies”. Lijphart himself goes even further and has since the mid-1980s recommended that consociational practices should be implemented in *all* democracies, not only in divided ones (Lijphart, 2018, p. 4; Doorenspleet & Maleki, 2018, p. 14).

However, the model has also received its fair share of criticism. Doubts have been raised about its compatibility with the democratic ideal of participation (Qvortrup, 2018, p. 178), since it heavily relies on cooperation between political elites and thereby keeps the public passive (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2020, pp. 32–33). Recent empirical tests of the model’s performance have also yielded mixed results, both in younger consociations (McGarry, 2019), and — perhaps more interestingly — also with respect to the classic cases (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2020). In Belgium, the traditional cleavages along lines of religion and class have made way for divisions along linguistic lines, in what Andeweg (2019, p. 417) dubs *consociationalism 2.0*. This realigned conflict dynamic seems less responsive to

¹ Lijphart’s model of consociational democracy should not be confused with the related but distinct concept of *consensus democracy*. The difference between the two is explained in greater detail below, see section 2.2.3.

² In the remainder of this thesis, *divided* is used synonymously with *plural*. See section 2.1.

consociational practices, with the traditional party families at the heart of power-sharing being increasingly challenged by regionalist, secessionist, and populist parties (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2020, pp. 32–33). In Switzerland, an increasingly polarised parliament and political elites’ decreased willingness to cooperate has meant a “hollowed-out” version of consociationalism (Freiburghaus & Vatter, 2019, p. 358). Moreover, the largest party in the Swiss parliament is openly opposed to the consociational way of governing (Emmenegger et al., 2023, p. 7). While these developments in part constitute manifestations of a global upsurge in populist and radical right ideas and parties (Mudde, 2022, pp. 15, 17), research shows a particular correlation between consociationalism and the success of populist parties (Andeweg, 2019, p. 420). Finally, the other two classic consociations identified by Lijphart — Austria and the Netherlands — have gone through processes of ‘de-consocialisation’, in favour of more competitive systems of governance (O’Leary, 2020, pp. 556, 558).

Taken together, these observations raise doubts about Lijphart’s optimism and the unequivocal recommendations of the model. If cracks are starting to form even in the countries with the longest histories of consociational practices and with the most favourable conditions for their success, what is the future of the consociational model of democracy? Has the conflict-managing capabilities of the model surpassed their heyday, calling for other approaches?

1.2 Purpose

Questions concerning the performance of and future viability of the consociational model constitute the departure point for this thesis. Through a comparative case study (Teorell & Svensson, 2007, p. 236) of the present application of the model in two countries — Belgium and Switzerland — the thesis aims to take stock of the state of consociationalism. This line of questioning is of relevance both within the discipline of political science, and outside of academia.

By critically examining the model’s application in two countries where it has been in place for a long time, the thesis can identify successful and failed aspects of its implementation. Conclusions about the actual outcomes of the model in these two countries can either strengthen or challenge recommendations for the model’s application in other contexts, following a ‘most likely’ logic (Teorell & Svensson, 2007, p. 154). Thereby, the thesis achieves both a degree of generalisability and has relevance outside of academia (Teorell & Svensson, 2007, pp. 18, 68).

The thesis is also of intradisciplinary relevance (Teorell & Svensson, 2007, p. 18), through a contribution to the discussion about the application of the model. Most previous research has focused either on *one* case or on the model as a whole. By utilising a research design which compares two cases, and thereby combines the

aforementioned approaches, the thesis can reach wider conclusions while still retaining an in-depth analysis of individual cases.³

1.3 Delimitations

The consociational research agenda is vast, both in terms of the number of publications and the variety of topics discussed (Bogaards et al., 2019). Therefore, in order to reach a fruitful conclusion within the limited scope of a bachelor thesis, delimitations must be drawn up (Teorell & Svensson, 2007, pp. 21–22). First, the thesis focuses on *two cases* of applied consociationalism: Belgium and Switzerland. Second, while some historical context is provided, the centre of attention is the *present application* of the model. Third, I focus my evaluation of the model's capabilities on Lijphart's *original* formulation of consociationalism, i.e. not on his revised model of *consensus democracy* developed from the mid-1980s and onward.⁴ Lastly, the weight of the analysis is placed on three of the model's five key characteristics: *grand coalition*, *segmental autonomy*, and *public passivity*.⁵

1.4 Research Questions

Building on the background, purpose, and delimitations presented above, this thesis probes the following research question (Q), which is further divided into two sub-questions (Q_A and Q_B):

Q: *What is the state of the consociational model of democracy in Belgium and Switzerland?*

Q_A: *How is the consociational model of democracy applied in the political institutions of Belgium and Switzerland, with respect to the key characteristics of grand coalition, segmental autonomy, and public passivity?*

Q_B: *What are the main challenges to the performance of the consociational model of democracy in Belgium and Switzerland, with respect to the key characteristics of grand coalition, segmental autonomy, and public passivity?*

³ For a more in-depth discussion of the research design, see section 4.1.

⁴ See section 2.2.3.

⁵ See section 2.2.1.

1.5 Thesis Structure

This first chapter has provided an introduction into the topic of the thesis and presented the research questions. The following chapter presents the theoretical framework and provides some conceptual definitions. Chapter 3 contains context on the two cases and presents previous research. Chapter 4 is devoted to research design and data, and discusses the methodology, operationalisation of key concepts, use of theory, and case selection. Chapter 5 consists of the analysis and conclusions, and in chapter 6 the implications of these conclusions are discussed. Chapter 6 also notes the limitations of the analysis and suggests avenues for further research. This closing chapter is followed by a list of references.

2 Theory and Definitions

This chapter serves to present the main theoretical framework: the consociational model of democracy. A brief section on important definitions is followed by a section on the theory, which is further divided into sub-sections on key characteristics, favourable conditions, later developments, and critiques.

2.1 Definitions

Avoiding ambiguity is of utmost importance in scientific studies. One part of achieving this goal involves providing clear definitions of important concepts (Teorell & Svensson, 2007, pp. 38–39). This thesis aims to come to conclusions concerning consociationalism, a model developed for maintaining stable democratic government in a *plural society* (Lijphart, 1977, p. 1; Jarrett, 2018, p. 37). Other scholars use different terms for describing the same concept, examples are *divided* (Deschouwer, 2012, p. 5; Lijphart, 2018, p. 1; Bogaards et al., 2019, p. 344; McGarry, 2019, p. 548), *deeply divided* (Doorenspleet & Maleki, 2018, p. 11; Andeweg, 2019, p. 408), *segmented* (Deschouwer, 2012, p. 5) and *fragmented* (Lijphart, 1969, p. 211) societies. Even though Lijphart uses the term *plural society* in the book on which the theoretical framework of this thesis is based, I intend to use *divided society* to refer to the concept, since it encompasses both the heterogeneity and conflict aspects of the concept. A **divided society** is therefore defined as a society divided by *segmental cleavages* into subsocietal *segments* (Lijphart, 1977, p. 3; Lijphart, 2012, p. 31). To understand this definition fully, we also need to assign meaning to the terms *segment* and *segmental cleavage*.

In his 1977 book, Lijphart borrows a definition from Harry Eckstein, who defines **segmental cleavages** as “lines of objective social differentiation, especially those particularly salient in a society” (Eckstein, 1966, as cited in Lijphart, 1977, p. 3). These cleavages can be of a “religious, ideological, linguistic, regional, cultural, racial, or ethnic nature” and “political parties, interest groups, media, [...], schools, and voluntary associations” tend to be organised along them (Lijphart, 1977, p. 4). The resulting subsocietal groups delineated by the cleavages are referred to as the **segments** of society.

2.2 The Consociational Model of Democracy

The consociational model of democracy is a theory for conflict management, democracy, and political stability in divided societies, developed by Dutch–American political scientist Arend Lijphart. While he had mentioned the basic concept in a case study of his home country, the Netherlands (Lijphart, 1968a), and in a research project on typologies of democratic systems (Lijphart, 1969b), it was a 1969 article in *World Politics* (Lijphart, 1969) that became the frequently cited ‘classical statement’ of the model (Lijphart, 2008, p. 3; Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2020, pp. 28–29).

In this article, Lijphart presents a modification of Gabriel Almond’s threefold typology of democracies which divides political systems into an ‘Anglo-American’ and a ‘Continental European’ category. A third category, which is not given a label, contains the countries that combine features of the two other categories (Almond, 1956, as cited in Lijphart, 1969, p. 207). Lijphart criticises this third category as poorly defined and instead presents a revamped typology based on two variables: (1) degree of societal homogeneity and (2) political stability (Lijphart, 1969, p. 222).

Lijphart calls the homogenous and stable democracies *centripetal democracies*, while the fragmented and unstable ones are given the label *centrifugal democracies* (Lijphart, 1969, p. 222). It is in the process of assigning countries to these two categories that Lijphart discovers a set of countries that do not belong in either. These deviant cases, which are fragmented but nonetheless exhibit political stability, are placed in the new category of *consociational democracies* (Lijphart, 1969, p. 211).

2.2.1 Key Characteristics

The theory presented in the 1969 article is expanded upon and more thoroughly explained in the 1977 book *Democracy in Plural Societies* (Lijphart, 1977), which for this reason constitutes the core formulation of the theory used in my thesis. Lijphart defines consociational democracy as “both an empirical and [...] normative model” (Lijphart, 1977, p. 1), dependent on four key characteristics: (1) government by *grand coalition*, (2) a system of *mutual veto*, (3) *proportionality* as the mechanism for political representation, civil service appointments and public funds allocation, and (4) a high degree of *segmental autonomy* (Lijphart, 1977, p. 25).

Lijphart describes the first element, *grand coalition*, as the most important one.⁶ Government by grand coalition entails that “the political leaders of all significant segments of the divided society cooperate [...] to govern the country” (Lijphart,

⁶ However, in more recent accounts, Lijphart has argued that the element of *segmental autonomy* is of equal importance, putting the two together in a category of ‘primary characteristics’ (McGarry, 2019, p. 548; Lijphart, 2004, p. 97).

1977, p. 25), and is thus a recommendation of elite cooperation. Lijphart builds on the ideas of William H. Riker and Gabriel Almond by contrasting this grand coalition element to the *government-versus-opposition* model, which is practiced in e.g. the United Kingdom (Lijphart, 1977, pp. 25–27). This model works well in homogenous societies because the stakes are not too high and politics functions as a ‘game’. When the stakes *are* high, however, such as during times of crisis, the government-versus-opposition model breaks down and a grand coalition is more suitable. Examples of grand coalition governments in homogenous societies include the governments in the United Kingdom and Sweden during World War II (Lijphart, 1977, p. 28). Lijphart’s argument is that in divided societies, the stakes are *always* high; it is the society itself that constitutes the ‘crisis’ (Lijphart, 1977, pp. 28, 29). Therefore, a grand coalition government is crucial to achieve peace and stability in a divided society.

The second element, the *mutual veto* mechanism,⁷ is a complement to the grand coalition element which ensures full minority protection (Lijphart, 1977, pp. 36–37). Lijphart argues that even though a grand coalition government provides important inclusion of minorities, the minority can still be outvoted *within* the government, if there is disagreement on an issue (Lijphart, 1977, p. 36). By equipping the minority segment(s) with a veto power, full protection is ensured.

The third element of the consociational model is that of *proportionality*, which Lijphart argues should function as the standard mechanism for political representation, civil service appointments and allocation of government funds (Lijphart, 1977, pp. 38–39). He also mentions parity (i.e., equal representation) as a useful alternative to proportionality in societies divided into two segments of unequal size (Lijphart, 1977, p. 41).

The fourth and final element concerns *segmental autonomy*.⁸ Lijphart emphasises that the purpose of consociationalism is not to abolish or weaken the segmental cleavages present in society, but rather to recognise them and to pacify inter-segmental conflict (Lijphart, 1977, p. 42). A crucial way of achieving this is giving the segments authority over their own affairs by delegating competences to them in areas of their exclusive concern (Lijphart, 1977, p. 41). A common institutional tool implemented for this purpose is *federalism*, which Lijphart designates as a “special form of segmental autonomy” (Lijphart, 1977, p. 42).

In addition to the four institutional characteristics described above, consociational democracy relies on one *cultural* characteristic, or “assumption” (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2020, p. 29), namely that of *public passivity*. This characteristic is implied, but not explicitly stated as a separate characteristic in Lijphart’s work. Caluwaerts and Reuchamps (2020, p. 32) explain the logic in the following way:

Grumbling masses would mean the death blow for the politics of pacification, because they would put pressure on their segmental elites and render any compromise unacceptable [...]. [I]nvolving citizens, with their different voices and opinions, is

⁷ Also referred to as the *minority veto* in some texts (e.g. Lijphart, 2018, p. 1).

⁸ Also called *cultural autonomy* (see e.g. Lijphart, 2018, p. 3).

likely to further complicate political decision-making in a divided society and therefore impedes the search for consensus and thus the achievement of political stability [...].

Accordingly, the four institutional characteristics — *grand coalition*, *mutual veto*, *proportionality*, and *segmental autonomy* — together with the cultural characteristic of *public passivity* define the consociational model of democracy. A summary of these characteristics is provided in table 2.1.

Table 2.1. The key characteristics of consociational democracy and their underlying mechanisms. Source: own work based on Lijphart (1977); Caluwaerts & Reuchamps (2020).

Concept	Characteristic		Mechanism
Consociational democracy	Institutional	Grand coalition	Elite cooperation through government representation of all significant segments.
		Mutual veto	Veto powers for minorities within the government, to ensure political protection.
		Proportionality	Proportional – <i>representation</i> in decision-making institutions. – <i>distribution</i> of civil service appointments and government funds.
		Segmental autonomy	Exclusive authority for the segments over their internal affairs.
	Cultural	Public passivity	Decision-making and cooperation are left to political elites, while the public masses remain passive.

2.2.2 Favourable Conditions

In the same book, Lijphart points to a set of favourable conditions for consociational democracy, by describing some commonalities between the ‘classic’ cases, i.e. the four European nations that the formulation of the theory is based on.⁹ While the favourable conditions are “neither indispensable nor sufficient” (Lijphart, 1977, p. 54) for the success of consociationalism, they are nevertheless useful tools for understanding the dynamics that might affect the application of the model. Table 2.2 contains a summary of the favourable conditions and their underlying mechanisms.

⁹ Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. Lijphart also regards Luxembourg as a classic case of consociationalism, but he excludes it from his study, citing the lack of available data (Lijphart, 1977, p. 5).

Table 2.2. Favourable conditions for consociational democracy described by Lijphart (1977), and their underlying mechanisms. Source: own work based on Lijphart (1977).

Favourable Condition	Mechanism	
Multiple balance of power	Minimises the risk that elites interpret politics as a zero-sum game, and fosters achieving political aims through cooperation rather than domination.	
Small country size	Direct	Facilitates decision-making, since elites are more likely to know each other personally, and meet often.
		Fosters internal solidarity, since small countries are likely to be or feel threatened by larger countries.
	Indirect	Makes governing easier, since small countries tend to be less complex.
		Avoids difficult choices on foreign policy, since small countries have a limited power on the international scene.
Overarching loyalties	Acts as a unifying force, through agreement transcending the segmental divides.	
Cross-cutting cleavages	Affects the numbers and relative sizes of segments, and therefore their balance of power. Mixed evidence.	
Prior traditions of elite accommodation	Prevents escalation of disagreement into conflict, through delegation of decision-making from the public masses to the segmental leaders.	
Segmental isolation	Minimises opportunity for conflict to arise, through the exclusive authority of segments over their internal affairs.	

2.2.3 Later Developments: Consociational vs. Consensus Democracy

From the mid-1980s on, Lijphart modified his model in an effort to apply it to not just divided democracies but *all* democracies. At the same time, he wanted a more precise way to measure the key characteristics of the model (Lijphart, 2018, pp. 4–5). This effort resulted in the publication of *Democracies* (Lijphart, 1984), in which the qualitative characteristics of consociational democracy presented above are transformed into *quantitative* characteristics together defining the similar, but not identical concept of *consensus democracy* (Lijphart, 2018, p. 5). Writing on the relationship between the two models, Lijphart (2008, p. 8) notes that

[c]onsociational and consensus democracy have a large area of overlap, but neither is completely encompassed by the other. This means that consociational democracy cannot be seen as a special form of consensus democracy or vice versa.

This shift in focus also coincided with the nature of Lijphart’s recommendations. In his earlier works, he recommended a consociational model for divided democracies, while preferring majoritarian systems for more homogeneous countries. With the findings in *Democracies* in mind, he has argued that consociational and consensus models are “superior [...] for all democracies and in almost all respects” (Lijphart, 2008, p. 8). This thesis focuses on the *consociational* as opposed to the *consensus* model of democracy.

2.2.4 Critiques

The mere fact that the consociational model has remained relevant in the literature for fifty-five years speaks to its strength and significance. In an era of populism, increased polarisation, and democratic backsliding, Bogaards et al. (2019, p. 342) argue that the value of consociationalism as a concept for peaceful conflict regulation has increased. However, like with all influential ideas, it has also been the recipient of a fair share of criticism. The critiques can be divided into two broad categories: theoretical or normative objections that pertain to the model itself, and empirical findings, which have yielded mixed results on the performance of the model.

A fundamental critique of the model, which touches upon its requisite of public passivity, is that it is undemocratic from a participatory ideal. For the purposes of conflict mediation and simplifying decision-making processes, political bargaining and compromise is left to the elites (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2020, p. 32), thereby minimising the role of the public (Andeweg, 2015, p. 694; Qvortrup, 2018, p. 178). This is somewhat peculiar since Lijphart defines *democracy* as an approximation of Robert Dahl's concept of *polyarchy* (Lijphart, 1977, p. 4), which sees inclusion of all members of the polity as one of the required criteria for a democratic process (Dahl, 2015, p. 37). Consequently, the public passivity assumption seems to be in violation of the very school of democracy that Lijphart claims to adhere to.

This critique can also be viewed in light of the current era of increased populism (Mudde, 2004, p. 550; Mudde, 2022, pp. 36, 46, 124). The elitist and 'top-down' nature of consociationalism (Jarrett, 2018, p. 39) stands in contrast to the inherently "anti-elitist ideology" of populism (Bogaards et al., 2019, p. 342). Bogaards et al. view this contradiction as a positive thing, since consociationalism marks a clear theoretical alternative to a populist government (Bogaards et al., 2019, p. 342). Other scholars argue the opposite and establish a clear correlation between consociational democracy and the strength of populist parties (Hakhverdian & Koop, 2007, p. 401; Andeweg, 2019, p. 420). With respect to the classic consociations, and especially Belgium, Deschouwer (2012, p. 10) describes it as follows:

The consociational democracy has been transformed into a 'depoliticized' or 'cartel' democracy, where the practices of consociational democracy are continued in a society that no longer needs these pacifying or protecting devices [...]. A depoliticized democracy is likely to be challenged and questioned for its lack of debate, flexibility and performance.

Andeweg therefore warns that "if voters are denied a meaningful choice within the system, they will vote against [it]", and that "post-consociationalist systems seem particularly vulnerable in this respect" (Andeweg, 2019, pp. 422–423).

Another line of critique centres around the core conflict-managing mechanism of the consociational model. An aspect that sets apart consociationalism from more integrationist (Jarrett, 2018, p. 37) schools of conflict management is that its approach "is not to abolish or weaken segmental cleavages but to recognize them

explicitly” (Lijphart, 1977, p. 42). Jarrett identifies this accommodative nature as one of the most common criticisms of the model, because “some argue [that it] fails to mitigate the significance of different groups in a divided society and ultimately leaves the root cause of conflict intact” (Jarrett, 2018, p. 35). The argument is that while consociationalism has demonstrated success in managing conflict through recognising segmental cleavages, it does so at the expense of a stable and lasting solution: consociational practices do not have the ability to “bring about a genuinely shared, common identity” (Jarrett, 2018, pp. 41, 51). On a wider plane, scholars have argued that self-rule and federal solutions to segmental conflict lead to a “dilemma of recognition”, where “[m]easures designed to guarantee minority representation [...] can also act as a base for further separation — both in physical form and in mentality” (Erk & Anderson, 2009, p. 192; Kuzu & Jakala, 2018, pp. xv–xvi).

Lijphart’s central proposition — that stable democracy in a divided society does not require the presence of cross-cutting cleavages but can also be secured by intersegmental cooperation at the elite level — has gone relatively unchallenged by critics (Andeweg, 2015, p. 693). However, objections have been directed at Lijphart’s unclear definitions and operationalisations of central concepts, and his vague motivations for the key characteristics of and favourable conditions for consociational democracy. Finally, the prescriptive elements, i.e. recommendations of consociationalism for other countries than the classic cases, have come under attack (Andeweg, 2015, pp. 693–694).

3 Context and Literature Review

3.1 Context

To understand the dynamics of consociational practices in Belgium and Switzerland, a description of the cleavages they aim at managing and the historical and political context in which they operate, is needed. This first section of the chapter therefore provides context for the two countries analysed in the thesis, Belgium and Switzerland.

3.1.1 Belgium

In the aftermath of the armistice of World War I, King Albert I arranged a meeting with the leaders of the three main political forces in Belgium at the time — Catholics, Liberals, and Socialists (Deschouwer, 2012, pp. 6, 42). This 1918 meeting, which resulted in the Loppem Agreement¹⁰ on the country's future political order, is viewed by most scholars as the start of consociationalism in Belgium (Deschouwer, 2012, p. 6; Jarrett, 2018, p. 46; McGarry, 2019, p. 538). Consociational history in Belgium since then can be divided into two distinct periods based on the most salient cleavages. Using Rudy Andeweg's terminology, these are *consociationalism 1.0* (1918–1970), where cleavages along lines of religion and class were the most salient; and *consociationalism 2.0* (1970–present), where so-called *deplillarisation* along the previous conflict lines has paved the way for the linguistic cleavage — already quite salient since the end of World War I — to climb to the top (Andeweg, 2019, p. 417).

The linguistic cleavage in Belgium stems from the fact that the country has both French- and Dutch-speakers. The northern part of the country — Flanders — is predominantly Dutch-speaking, while the south — Wallonia — is predominantly Francophone. There is also a small German-speaking minority in the southeast of the country. The capital city Brussels is officially bilingual, but French is the larger language. Historically, French was also the sole official language of the state, since it was the language of the political elites (Deschouwer, 2012, p. 30). Over time, however, demands from the Flemish population meant that the two languages were set on an equal footing as official languages of Belgium in the end of the 19th

¹⁰ French: *Pacte de Lophem*; Dutch: *Akkoord van Loppem*.

century; in 1930, Ghent University became the first Dutch-speaking university (Deschouwer, 2012, pp. 34, 42).

A state reform in 1970 was the first in a series¹¹ of constitutional changes that gradually delegated more power to lower levels of government. The fourth state reform in 1993 officially made Belgium into a federal state (Deschouwer, 2012, pp. 43, 45), comprised of two different types of subunits: the *regions*,¹² which mostly handle matters related to *territory* (e.g. economic affairs, public works, transport, and environment) and the *communities*,¹³ which handle matters related to *people* (e.g. education, culture, and language use). Remaining competences (e.g. justice, social security, and defence) instead belong to the federal government, which is comprised of two language groups (Deschouwer, 2012, pp. 59–62). There are three regions — Flanders, Wallonia, and the Brussels Capital Region — and three communities — the Flemish Community, the French Community, and the small German-speaking Community in the east of the country (Deschouwer, 2012, p. 53). Each region and community has its own executive and parliament, and regions are further subdivided into provinces, arrondissements, and municipalities. Matters are complicated even further by the fact that the Flemish Community and Flemish Region are merged and thereby share institutions (Deschouwer, 2012, p. 56).

3.1.2 Switzerland

Regarding the history of federalism, Switzerland follows a pattern opposite to that of Belgium; rather than a unitary nation-state being split up into different subunits, the different subunits united to form the nation-state. For this reason, Switzerland is referred to as a *confederation* or a ‘coming-together federation’ (Church & Head, 2013, p. 70; Deschouwer, 2012, p. 46). Switzerland employs a foreign policy of ‘armed neutrality’, and is consequently not a member of NATO or the EU, unlike Belgium (Linder & Mueller, 2023, pp. 28–29; Bernauer & Walter, 2023, p. 100). In other aspects, the two countries are quite similar: they have a similar population size, contain multiple language groups, lie in Western Europe, and — most importantly — are both regarded as classic cases of consociationalism (Lijphart, 1977, pp. 1, 25–103; McGarry, 2019, p. 538; Emmenegger et al., 2023, p. 5).

The Swiss Confederation¹⁴ is made up of twenty-six first-level subdivisions: the *cantons* (Vatter, 2023, p. 235). These cantons are further subdivided into *municipalities* (Ladner & Keuffer, 2023, p. 256). Cooperation and conflict between the different cantons have a long history, but modern Switzerland was created in 1848, following the end of the Sonderbund War (Emmenegger et al., 2023, p. 3). Emmenegger et al. (2023, p. 3) describe Switzerland as a rare case of successful nation-building on a multicultural basis, i.e. a unification process that did not rely

¹¹ The six state reforms took place in 1970, 1980, 1988, 1993, 2001, and 2011 (Deschouwer, 2012, pp. 43, 52–59).

¹² French: *régions*; Dutch: *gewesten*; German: *Regionen*.

¹³ French: *communautés*; Dutch: *gemeenschappen*; German: *Gemeinschaften*.

¹⁴ German: *Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft*; French: *Confédération suisse*; Italian: *Confederazione Svizzera*; Romansh: *Confederaziun svizra*.

on a common language, religion, or culture, but rather on common institutions (Linder & Mueller, 2023, p. 16). Traditions of cooperation and amicable agreement allow the Swiss to “speak ‘the same language’ even if they do not do so in a literal sense” (Gellner, 1964, as cited in Emmenegger et al., 2023, p. 3).

Switzerland is a multilingual nation with four official languages: German, French, Italian, and Romansh. German is the dominant language, with roughly 73 percent of the population claiming it as their main language; French- and Italian-speakers are sizable minorities, with 21 and 4 percent of the population, respectively; and Romansh is spoken by a small group (0.6 percent) in the south-east of the country (Linder & Mueller, 2023, p. 19).

The federal executive of Switzerland is unique, and a clear example of consociational grand coalition power-sharing. Instead of a government led by a prime minister that is responsible to parliament, Switzerland is led by the seven-member Federal Council (Papadopoulos & Sager, 2023, pp. 195–196), where decisions are taken jointly. The composition of the seven-member body is governed by a so-called ‘magic formula’, which ensures proportional representation on the basis of political party, language, and gender. In its current form, the formula means that the Federal Council is composed of two members from the People’s Party, two from the Social Democratic Party, two from The Liberals, and one from The Centre (Federal Council, 2024a).

Another peculiarity of the Swiss political system, which is unique in a comparative sense but especially paradoxical to the consociational assumption of public passivity, is the device of direct democracy, i.e. the frequent use of referendums (Qvortrup, 2018, p. 177). There are two categories of referendums in Switzerland: constitutional referendums and optional referendums. The former are mandatory and result either from a revision of the constitution passed by the government or by a proposal from at least 100,000 citizens (Qvortrup, 2018, p. 183). The latter can be triggered by 50,000 citizens or eight cantons after the publication of an amendment to any law (Qvortrup, 2018, pp. 183–184). Since 1848, 691 referendums have been held in Switzerland (Sciarini & Tresch, 2023, p. 413; Swissvotes, 2024). This is a stark contrast to Belgium, where only a single referendum has been held.

3.2 Literature Review

Fifty-five years have passed since Lijphart’s original account of the consociational theory was published (Lijphart, 1969). Despite this, interest in the topic has grown over time, with Bogaards et al. (2019, p. 343) ascertaining that 80 percent of journal articles on consociationalism have been published after the year 2000. The ever-growing number of publications has also meant a wider focus, with the bulk of recent literature focusing on the application of the model in younger consociations such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Northern Ireland, and Lebanon (Bogaards et al, 2019, p. 345), or taking a more theory-centred approach with critiques and modifications (e.g. Jarrett, 2018; McGarry, 2019; Bogaards, 2024).

Even though the recent focus has mostly been on newer consociations and consociationalism as a tool in post-conflict situations, some scholars have also returned to the classical cases. Caluwaerts and Reuchamps (2020) perform a case study of Belgium and find that consociational practices are still firmly in place, but that the future of the model is quite pessimistic (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2020, pp. 44–45). A few comparative case studies on consociationalism have been performed on the classic cases, notable examples include Andeweg's (2019) case study of Belgium and the Netherlands and a comparison of Austria and Switzerland by Ludger et al. (2015).

The pairing of Belgium and Switzerland has however not been the subject of a comparative case study with the purpose of examining the application of and challenges facing consociationalism specifically, making this contribution unique.

4 Methods and Data

4.1 Research Design

The scientific literature on the consociational model of democracy is not only vast in terms of the number of contributions and the topics covered, but also in the variety of methodological approaches — there is no set formula for *how* to study the application of consociationalism. While Lijphart’s original writings (Lijphart, 1969; 1977) featured a deviant case research design, where he identified cases that did not fit into a typology and tried to explain why, other scholars have taken different approaches.

Despite the variety in methodological approaches, single-n case study approaches have ultimately dominated the consociational research agenda. Acknowledging this, Walsh (2020, pp. 89–90) argued that large-n methods would enrich the research on consociationalism. However, other scholars warn that such research approaches run the risk of what Sartori (1970) calls *conceptual stretching*, since “[f]ull-fledged cases of consociational democracy [...] are indeed limited” (Bogaards et al., 2019, p. 349). This dilemma leaves the consociational researcher with a difficult choice. The first option is to conduct a large-n study which would broaden the literature and demonstrate a higher degree of generalisability, but at the same time runs the risk of conceptual stretching and therefore not really study ‘true’ consociationalism. The second option is a small-n case study which minimises the risk of watering down the concept of consociationalism, but instead might run the risk of limited generalisability and universal insights about the model.

In an effort to contribute to the literature within the limited scope and time frame of a bachelor thesis, I have settled on a compromise between these two options: a *comparative case study* (Teorell & Svenson, 2007, pp. 236–246) examining two cases of consociationalism. A comparative case study allows me to avoid veering too far off from Lijphart’s formulation of consociationalism, but at the same time allows for better generalisation possibilities than a single-n case study would. The comparative case study still yields a considerable degree of flexibility in research design, and I have therefore chosen to replicate aspects of the approach taken by Caluwaerts and Reuchamps (2020) in their theory-applying study of Belgian consociationalism: namely their strategy of structuring the analysis around the key characteristics of the model. In the same vein, I split my analysis into sub-sections on grand coalition, segmental autonomy, and public passivity.

4.1.1 Use of Theory

Useful contributions to political science research ought to be thoroughly anchored in theory (Teorell & Svensson, 2007, p. 236; Badersten & Gustavsson, 2015, p. 94). Since the aims of this thesis are twofold — to understand how consociationalism is applied in the real world, and from that identify challenges to the model — it takes both a theory-applying and theory-developing approach (Badersten & Gustavsson, 2015, pp. 94–95). The resulting assessment of the state of consociationalism undertaken in the analysis chapter can then be used in the discussion to compare the consociational model to other alternatives and to reach an informed and well-rounded opinion on the recommendations of the model's application in other contexts.

4.1.2 Operationalisation

As mentioned above, the analysis chapter of this thesis concerns the application of consociational structures in the political institutions of Belgium and Switzerland on a macro level. The three key characteristics we are concerned with (*grand coalition*, *segmental autonomy*, and *public passivity*) therefore need to be operationalised. Since the unit of analysis is the country as a whole, the focus here lies on the federal, i.e. nation-wide political institutions, and not the institutions in the individual sub-units (i.e. regions and communities in Belgium, cantons in Switzerland).

First, a *grand coalition* government is one that includes leaders of all significant segments in society. A grand coalition government is therefore operationalised as a federal executive composed of parties or members representing different segments of society, and the absence of a clear opposition. This can be viewed in contrast to a government in a more competitive political system, which often entails a single-party government or a coalition of like-minded parties, with a clear opposition.

Second, clear *segmental autonomy* entails that the segments of society have a large degree of self-rule in policy areas of their exclusive concern. It is therefore operationalised as the nation-state being split up into sub-units that align with the segmental divides, to which competences are delegated. The institution of federalism is a clear example of this, which can be contrasted with unitary forms of government, where decisions are centralised to the national political institutions and delegation of competences to sub-national units is limited.

Third, the *public passivity* assumption entails that political decision-making is primarily executed through elite bargaining: it is a task reserved for the leaders of the segments in society, not the citizens. The degree of public passivity can be measured in several ways, but for the purpose of this study, it is operationalised as citizen involvement in the political process through direct democratic institutions. This operationalisation ensures that the characteristic can be analysed in a concrete way, with respect to both countries under examination.

4.2 Case Selection

The rationale for choosing the countries of Belgium and Switzerland as the subjects of analysis in this thesis in part stems from the discussion of conceptual stretching above. As established before, Lijphart based the theory of consociationalism on the four classic cases of Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. Since then, a subset of the literature has been tasked with determining which countries are consociational and which ones are not. Dixon (2018, p. 69) lists 44 countries that have been claimed to be consociational at some point in time by leading scholars on the topic: all of which clearly do not hold up to closer scrutiny (Bogaards et al., 2019, pp. 344, 350).

To avoid the conceptual stretching pitfall, I therefore return to selecting from the pool of classic cases. Of those, Austria and the Netherlands are both deemed to have traded their consociationalism for more competitive systems of government (Helms et al., 2019, p. 381; Andeweg, 2019, p. 417). Thus, we are left with the pair of Belgium and Switzerland. A lucky coincidence is that the two countries are quite well-suited for comparison: they are quite similar in size (both with regards to population and land area), are both multilingual, and rank high on measures of economic prosperity and human development.

An additional advantage of taking stock of the state of consociationalism in two classic cases is that they have the longest histories of applying the model, and the most favourable conditions for it to succeed. Thereby, following a ‘most likely’ logic (Badersten & Gustavsson, 2015, pp. 109–110), if the analysis finds that there are considerable challenges to the application in these two countries, recommendations for its use in other contexts can be put into question. We shall return to this point in the closing discussion of the results.

In sum, rather than making use of an orthodox case selection strategy, the two subjects for the comparative case study are selected through a series of deliberate choices that take the risk of conceptual stretching, possibilities for generalisability, and suitability for comparison into account.

4.3 Data

This thesis fundamentally relies on secondary data to present the theoretical framework and perform the analysis. This entails that I have not collected any data from scratch (such as surveys, interviews, etc.), which makes the critical evaluation of sources especially important. For the formulation of the consociational theory, *Democracy in Plural Societies* (Lijphart, 1977) has been the main source. Context on the Belgian and Swiss political systems is provided by *The Politics of Belgium* (Deschouwer, 2012) and *The Oxford Handbook of Swiss Politics* (Emmenegger et al., 2023). Discussions of the theory and its application are based on peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters; a special issue of the *Swiss Political Science*

Review (vol. 25, no. 4) on consociationalism and the anthology *Consociationalism and Power-Sharing in Europe* (Jakala et al., 2018) have proved especially useful. Databases and government sources have been used to collect data on election results, seat distributions in parliament, etc. A transparent use of data is ensured by the use of in-text citations throughout the thesis; the complete list of references is provided in the final section of the thesis.

5 Analysis and Conclusions

In this chapter, the comparative case study of Belgium and Switzerland is performed, in search of an answer to the research questions presented in section 1.4. The first section (5.1) deals with the first sub-question (Q_A) on the present application of consociational practices in the Belgian and Swiss political institutions. Section 5.2 turns to the second sub-question (Q_B) and identifies challenges facing the application of the model in the two countries. Section 5.3 combines the findings from the two previous sections and comes to a conclusion regarding the overarching research question (Q).

5.1 Present Application of Consociationalism (Q_A)

To answer the first sub-question, Q_A, which concerns the current application of consociationalism in Belgium and Switzerland, we turn our attention to three of the five key characteristics identified in chapter 2: *grand coalition*, *segmental autonomy*, and *public passivity*.

5.1.1 Grand Coalition

In order to determine the application of grand coalition practices on a nation-wide basis in Belgium and Switzerland, we must turn our attention to the composition of the federal executive bodies in the two countries.

Beginning with Belgium, federal executive power is vested in the federal government, which is led by a prime minister and composed of 14 additional ministers. A proportionality rule states that half of the ministers need to be French-speakers and half need to be Dutch-speakers. The prime minister can be of either language group (Deschouwer, 2012, p. 151; Belgian House of Representatives, 2021, art. 99). Table 5.1 lists the governing coalitions in the Belgian federal government since the turn of the century.

Table 5.1. Federal governments in Belgium, 1999–2024. The party of the prime minister is indicated in **bold**. Source: own work based on Deschouwer (2012); Caluwaerts & Reuchamps (2020); Aspeslagh et al. (2023). Majority (Tot.) = government parties hold majority of seats in parliament, Majority (Fl.) = Flemish government parties hold majority of Flemish/Dutch-speaking seats in parliament, Majority (Fr.) = Francophone government parties hold majority of Francophone seats in parliament.

Years	Government	Constituent Parties ¹⁵		Majority in Parliament		
		Flemish	Francophone	Fl.	Fr.	Tot.
1999–2003	Verhofstadt I	VLD , SP.A, Agalev	PS, MR, Ecolo	Yes	Yes	Yes
2003–2007	Verhofstadt II	VLD , SP.A–Spirit	PS, MR	Yes	Yes	Yes
2007–2008	Verhofstadt III	Open VLD , CD&V	PS, MR, CDh	No	Yes	Yes
2008–2008	Leterme I	Open VLD, CD&V	PS, MR, CDh	No	Yes	Yes
2008–2009	Van Rompuy	Open VLD, CD&V	PS, MR, CDh	No	Yes	Yes
2009–2011	Leterme II	Open VLD, CD&V	PS, MR, CDh	No	Yes	Yes
2011–2014	Di Rupo	Open VLD, SP.A CD&V	PS , MR, CDh	No	Yes	Yes
2014–2018	Michel I	Open VLD, CD&V, N-VA	MR	Yes	No	Yes
2018–2019	Michel II	Open VLD, CD&V	MR	No	No	No
2019–2020	Wilmès I	Open VLD, CD&V	MR	No	No	No
2020–2020	Wilmès II	Open VLD, CD&V	MR	No	No	No
2020–	De Croo	Open VLD , Vooruit, CD&V, Groen	PS, MR, Ecolo	No	Yes	Yes

In the period from 1999 to today, Belgium has had twelve different governing coalitions at the federal level. If we understand segments in a narrow sense,¹⁶ all governments fulfil the characteristic of grand coalition, since all governments have contained at least one party from both language groups. Table 5.1 also shows that out of the twelve 21st century governments, all but three (Michel II, Wilmès I, and Wilmès II) have enjoyed a majority in parliament. These three exceptions can be explained by the exit of N-VA from the government (Michel II and Wilmès I) and the formation of an emergency cabinet during the COVID-19 pandemic because the ordinary post-election cabinet formation took too long (Wilmès II).

However, if we understand segments in a broader sense, the picture becomes fuzzier. Of the 12 governments, only half¹⁷ have contained representatives from all three traditional party families. Moreover, while most of the governments have held a majority of seats in parliament, it is often the case that there is not a majority in at least one of the language groups. As table 5.1 shows, this has most often been the case regarding the Flemish/Dutch-speaking group. An important contributing factor to this is the sharp increase in electoral support for Flemish regional parties in recent decades. In the 2019 federal election, almost half of the Flemish votes went to the two parties New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) and Flemish Interest (VB). Both parties advocate greater Flemish autonomy and VB support full independence from Belgium. While N-VA has been part of one government (Michel I), other parties have enforced a strict *cordon sanitaire* against VB since its entry into parliament,

¹⁵ The list of abbreviations contains the full party names.

¹⁶ That is, *segments* meaning the two main language groups, which has been the most salient segmental cleavage since 1970.

¹⁷ Verhofstadt III, Leterme I, Van Rompuy, Leterme II, Di Rupo, and De Croo. See table 5.1.

calling its political positions “anti-democratic”. This exclusion can be viewed as going against the grand coalition principle.

Turning to the Swiss case, implementation of grand coalition principles is quite different. In Switzerland, federal executive power is vested in the Federal Council, which is formally independent from parliament. The Federal Council is not a traditional government led by a prime minister. Rather, it is a seven-member institution whose members are elected on four-year terms by the members of both houses of parliament. A president is chosen among the seven members on a one-year basis; however, this person does not have any more political power except functioning as the chairman during meetings. The composition of the Federal Council is governed by the so-called ‘magic formula’. This formula is not formally written into the Swiss constitution or any law but is rather a voluntary political agreement between the parties to ensure a fair composition of the Federal Council. Table 5.2 shows the composition of the Federal Council since the year 2000.

Table 5.2. Composition of the Swiss Federal Council, 2000–2024. Source: own work based on Federal Council (2024b). Letters A–G denote the 7 seats in the Council. Each row denotes the incumbent on 1 January of that year. A line in a column (e.g. column A between 2002 and 2003) means that a new councillor has been elected to that seat.

Year	Seats						
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
2000	SP ¹⁸	SVP	SP	FDP	CVP	CVP	FDP
2001		SVP ¹⁹					
2002							
2003	SP				CVP		FDP
2004							
2005							
2006							
2007							
2008							
2009		SVP			FDP	CVP	SVP ²⁰
2010							
2011							
2012							
2013	SP			FDP	CVP/The Centre ²¹	SVP	FDP
2014							
2015							
2016							
2017							
2018							
2019							
2020							
2021							
2022							
2023	SVP	SP					
2024							

¹⁸ The German-language party abbreviations are used for brevity.

¹⁹ Samuel Schmid switched to the BDP in 2008 and represented them until his resignation later that year.

²⁰ Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf switched to the BDP in 2008 and represented them until her resignation in 2015.

²¹ The CVP merged into The Centre in 2021.

Table 5.2 shows that the current composition of the Federal Council is as follows: two councillors from the SP, two from the SVP, two from the FDP and one from The Centre. This formula has stayed the same for most of the period since 2000, except one change. Following the 2003 election to the Federal Council, one of the CVP's seats was given to the SVP (see column F in table 5.2). Compared to the Belgian case, the Swiss application of grand coalition practices is thus more stable. Instead of relying on complicated and lengthy government formation processes after each election to the federal parliament, the 'magic formula' ensures that the executive body can be formed in an easier fashion and avoids government deadlock.

When the 'magic formula' was first introduced, it included all major parties in the federal parliament in the consociational bargain. However, since then, other parties have gained significant support in elections without representation in the Federal Council. In the 2023 federal election, the Green Party and the Green Liberal Party together have 33 out of the 200 seats in the National Council (the lower house of the parliament), without any representatives in the Federal Council.

In sum, the analysis shows that grand coalition principles are present in the federal executives of both Belgium and Switzerland, but not without irregularities based on the 'ideal type' of consociationalism put forward by Lijphart.

5.1.2 Segmental Autonomy

Let us now turn our attention to the second key characteristic of consociationalism under examination: segmental autonomy. In both Belgium and Switzerland, self-rule for the segments of society is granted through the institution of federalism. While a federal system has been in place since the founding of modern Switzerland in 1848, it is a much newer addition to the Belgian political system; only in 1993 did Belgium officially become a federal state.

In Switzerland, segmental autonomy is achieved through cantonal self-rule, which is very extensive. As a consequence of their history as independent nations, the cantons retain their own constitutions, parliaments and governments and thus act independently from the federal state in many regards. This segmental autonomy is also an institutional safeguard for linguistic minorities: for example, the official language in the canton of Vaud is French, while in Graubünden/Grischun/Grigioni, German, Romansh, and Italian all have official status. Other examples of cantonal competences include court systems, education policy, and police. The sub-cantonal division into municipalities further enhances segmental autonomy.

Segmental autonomy in Belgium is, in a sense, more complex and controversial. The introduction of federalism was, as mentioned, aimed at addressing longstanding linguistic and regional tensions in the country. A series of state reforms over the last decades has moved Belgium from a unitary state, to one with far-reaching segmental autonomy. Table 5.3 provides a summary of key events relating to the history of Belgian federalism.

Table 5.3. Key events of the Belgian federalisation process. Source: own work based on Deschouwer (2012).

Year	Event
1963	Freezing of the language border.
1970	<i>First state reform.</i> Creation of the regions (Flanders, Wallonia) and communities (Flemish, French, German-speaking). No solution for bilingual Brussels. Federal decision-making now requires consensus between the language groups.
1980	<i>Second state reform.</i> Regions and communities receive more competences and their own parliaments and executives. The issue of Brussels is postponed.
1988	<i>Third state reform.</i> Even more competences are devolved to the regions and communities. The Brussels Capital Region is created.
1993	<i>Fourth state reform.</i> Belgium officially becomes a federal state. The parliaments of the regions and the communities are now directly elected.
2001	<i>Fifth state reform.</i> Further devolution of competences. The regions' and communities' fiscal powers are increased.
2011	<i>Sixth state reform.</i> Further devolution of competences. Reform of the Senate (the upper house of federal parliament), which is no longer directly elected.

The complexity of the Belgian federal system is rooted in the fact its sub-units overlap with each other; that is, the regions are not subordinate to the communities or vice versa. The federal structure in Belgium has no history like in Switzerland: the subdivisions had never existed before they were created. Because of this, and because of the comparatively greater politicisation of the linguistic and regional divide, the current “least bad” solution is a manufactured result of decades of compromise and top-down constitutional engineering. Nevertheless, it is evident that the Belgian federal system achieves segmental autonomy.

The state reforms displayed in table 5.3 share a common theme and direction: they are all steps along the road from unitarianism to federalism, from centralised to decentralised government. Major political forces, particularly in Flanders, want to continue along this road with full independence or secession as their ultimate goals. Interestingly, in recent years, other parties have started arguing for the complete opposite: the returning of competences to the federal government. This showcases the continued salience of the regional and linguistic divide in Belgian politics.

In conclusion, both Belgium and Switzerland clearly achieve the segmental autonomy characteristic of consociationalism through the application of federalism. Because of their differing historical and political contexts, the manifestation of this autonomy varies: the Swiss bottom-up approach reflects its history of independent nations coming together, while the top-down compromise in Belgium has led to a more complex and contested arrangement.

5.1.3 Public Passivity

Ordinary citizens' participation in the political process is usually positively regarded in society, and phenomena such as open discussion and high voter turnout rates are viewed as worth striving for. Consociationalism turns this perspective on its head, since public passivity in favour of elite cooperation is seen as a prerequisite for keeping the peace. Using the political institution of direct democracy through referendums as a proxy for the degree of public passivity showcases that the two

countries differ to quite a high degree regarding their implementation of this part of consociationalism.

Table 5.4. *Number of referendums in Belgium and Switzerland, 2000–2024. Source: Swissvotes (2024); Wouters & Andrienne-Moylan (2021). Status for Switzerland as of 20 May 2024.*

Country	Number of Referendums	
	Since 2000	Total
Belgium	0	1
Switzerland	214	691

Table 5.4 illustrates Belgium and Switzerland as polar opposites in their use of referendums. While Switzerland has held an average of nine referendums per year since 2000, there has only been one in the entire history of the independent Belgian state. The inconclusive results and amplified regional and linguistic tensions following the 1950 Belgian referendum on the return of King Leopold III made referendum use a taboo in the country (Qvortrup, 2018, p. 180). At the same time, it is a core mechanism of the Swiss political system.

Since the public passivity element is such an integral part of the consociational model of democracy and the fact that direct democracy seems like a direct violation of that principle, it follows that in this regard, Belgium is more consociational than Switzerland. However, this way of measuring public passivity might not paint the full picture, something we shall return to in the next section.

5.2 Challenges to Consociationalism (Q_B)

We have now established that, even if they are not perfect implementations of the consociational model, both Belgium and Switzerland clearly fulfil the key characteristics studied to such a degree that they can be considered consociational democracies. We now turn to the second sub-question, Q_B , on the challenges facing the application of the model. Like in the previous section, the focus is on the three key characteristics of grand coalition, segmental autonomy, and public passivity.

5.2.1 Grand Coalition

The first theme of challenges concerns political polarisation and fragmentation, which mainly challenges the grand coalition characteristic. In Belgium, the regional and linguistic divide has become more and more pronounced in recent years despite the presence of consociationalism. This is evidenced in part by the sharp increase in electoral support for secessionist, populist, and far-right parties, especially in Flanders. Following the 1999 federal election, Flemish nationalist parties held 23

out of the 150 seats (15.3%) in the Chamber of Representatives²² (IBZ, 2024a). After the 2019 election, that number had increased to 36 seats (24.0%),²³ and opinion polling for the 2024 election suggests that a further increase is likely (IBZ, 2024b; Grommen, 2024). The fact that parties such as Flemish Interest (VB) and New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) are receiving an increasing share of the Flemish vote makes it more difficult to form a federal government that includes leaders of all significant segments. N-VA have historically only taken part in one federal government (Michel I), which it left following a political crisis. VB, on the other hand, has consistently been excluded from the federal governments due to the *cordon sanitaire* put up against it by other parties. This makes it increasingly difficult for federal governments to secure a majority of the Flemish seats of parliament, undermining legitimacy and the whole principle behind power-sharing. Moreover, the splitting of the parties along language lines has further complicated coalition building since it involves more actors, the lengthy government formation processes following the 2010 and 2019 elections are examples of this.

Challenges to the grand coalition characteristic are also present in Switzerland. Freiburghaus and Mueller (2023, pp. 780–781) note that Swiss politics in recent decades has experienced high levels of political polarisation: both through an increasing ideological distance between the extreme positions and through centrist parties losing ground. This is particularly challenging for Switzerland, “because the entire political system rests on finding compromise solutions” (Freiburghaus & Mueller, 2023, p. 782). Recent literature has pointed out that the ‘amicable agreement’ principle that has traditionally permeated Swiss politics is being challenged by changes in elite behaviour, hollowing out the consociational system (Freiburghaus & Vatter, 2019, p. 358). The fact that the Swiss People’s Party (SVP), the largest party in the National Council, openly oppose the consociational system of governing Switzerland (Emmenegger et al., 2023, p. 7) and the fact that the GPS and GLP parties are not represented in the Federal Council despite together holding 16.5 percent of the seats in the National Council further challenge the grand coalition element of consociationalism in Switzerland.

5.2.2 Segmental Autonomy

As we have established, segmental autonomy is secured through federalism in both Belgium and Switzerland. The fact that Belgium consists of artificially constructed sub-units and has a much shorter history as a federal state than Switzerland seems to manifest itself in the challenges to the segmental autonomy characteristic: federalism is much more politicised than in Belgium. On the one hand, Flemish nationalist parties advocate for *more* autonomy, with Flemish Interest going so far as to demand complete secession. On the other hand, parties from the green, liberal, and socialist families on both sides of the language divide have started discussing

²² Flemish Interest (then called Flemish Bloc) held 15 seats, and the People’s Union (which later split into Spirit and N-VA) held 8 seats.

²³ N-VA holds 25 seats and Flemish Interest holds 18 seats.

refederalisation of some competences (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2020, pp. 41, 45). This a clear challenge to the segmental autonomy characteristic, and can be seen as a failure of the consociational mechanisms to adapt to the realigned conflict dynamic of *consociationalism 2.0*.

In Switzerland, strong segmental autonomy through federalism has a much longer history. In fact, it can be seen as the nation's *raison d'être*. Therefore, it is much less controversial or politicised than in Belgium and does not constitute a threat to consociationalism.

5.2.3 Public Passivity

At first glance, the direct democracy institution in Switzerland appears to challenge the public passivity characteristic of consociationalism. The logic is that allowing citizens to directly participate in decision-making processes clearly violates the minimal role allotted to them in the consociational bargain. However, research on this contradiction in terms has come to the opposite conclusion. Matt Qvortrup explains that the use of referendums in Switzerland “has provided a valuable mechanism for keeping consociationalism alive and relevant” by (1) providing parties in the grand coalition a way to distinguish themselves, (2) functioning as a vehicle for opposition parties to stay relevant, and (3) allowing civil society to provide input into the elite-dominated system (Qvortrup, 2018, pp. 189–190). In this view, it might be the *lack of referendums* in Belgium that constitutes a challenge to the consociational system.

Another aspect related to the public participation in the democratic process where the two countries diverge is voter turnout in elections. Switzerland is characterised as a low-turnout country, both with regards to direct-democratic referendums and regular elections, with average turnout rate at around 45 percent of the electorate (Sciarini & Tresch, 2023, p. 418). In contrast, Belgium enforces compulsory voting and consequently sees an average turnout rate of around 90 percent of the electorate (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2024). The low turnout rate in Switzerland weakens Qvortrup's argument, since it can be interpreted as a sign of public dissatisfaction with the status quo, thereby posing a challenge to consociationalism.

5.3 Conclusion: The State of Consociationalism (Q)

Bringing together the analysis of Q_A and Q_B in the two previous sections allows us to take stock of the state of consociationalism in Belgium and Switzerland, thereby answering the over-arching research question (Q).

A close examination of three key characteristics has shown that consociational principles still permeate the two countries and that they without a doubt can be referred to as paradigmatic cases of consociational democracy. However, a combination of global trends and domestic factors in the last few decades paint a

quite pessimistic picture of the model's continued adequacy and relevance — it is abundantly clear that cracks are starting to form in the mosaic of Swiss and Belgian consociationalism. One should be careful with making predictions for the future, but the evidence suggests that the coming years will be pivotal in determining the viability of the model for the Swiss and Belgian societies.

6 Discussion

The analysis of this thesis has shown that the political institutions of Belgium and Switzerland exhibit features of the consociational model of democracy to such an extent that they can still be considered paradigmatic cases of consociationalism. However, it has also been shown that the recent decades have proved considerable challenges to the model's continued application. This closing discussion serves three main purposes: to explore the broader implications of the conclusion, to identify limitations of the study, and to suggest avenues for further research.

The mixed performance and significant challenges to the model observed in Belgium and Switzerland, both of which have long histories of consociationalism and the most favourable conditions for it to succeed, raises important questions about the future applicability of the model — especially in contexts with less favourable conditions. The findings suggest that while consociationalism has many strengths and can be effective, its success hinges on careful consideration and a thorough understanding of local dynamics. This echoes previous research on the application of consociationalism in post-conflict scenarios and other non-classic cases (Doorenspleet & Maleki, 2018; Jarrett, 2018; McGarry, 2019) and puts Lijphart's view of consociationalism as a one-size-fits-all solution into question. In the words of Doorenspleet and Maleki (2018, p. 29),

we need to take different contextual factors seriously, and particularly different cultural orientations of societies. Instead of looking for the best model of democracy, we should seek for the most compatible model of democracy.

With that said, the generalisability of this study should not be overstated. Since the analysis focuses primarily on Belgium and Switzerland, and because of the complexity of isolating variables that contribute to the success or failure of consociationalism, we now return the discussion to the two studied cases.

The analysis of difficulties in applying the model reveals that a globalised world brings global challenges to consociationalism. For instance, the contemporary populist *zeitgeist* (Mudde, 2004) and wave of democratic backsliding (Mechkova, et al., 2017), exemplified by increased support for parties like VB in Belgium and SVP in Switzerland, underscore the need for continuous evaluation and adjustment of the political institutions, ensuring that they remain responsive to the evolving needs and demands of citizens.

The fact that the model is currently facing obstacles does not negate its past utility. In fact, it may be that consociationalism has been so successful at its goals so that it has effectively diminished the necessity for its own continuation (Andeweg, 2019, p. 420). Deliberative and more participatory forms of democracy,

as well as more integrationist schools of conflict resolution might prove useful in repairing the cracks in the consociational mosaic.

Further research is essential to deepen our understanding of consociationalism and its applicability, as well as the avenues forward for post-consociational societies. Additionally, more research on the European Union as a potential consociation might offer clues into how consociational principles can be effectively implemented and sustained in diverse contexts.

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