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Unstable Concepts, Unresolved Controversies: Reassembling Power-Sharing, Consociationalism, and Centripetalism

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ABSTRACT

After half a century of research, the literature on institutional design for ethnic conflict management is still in search of a scientific consensus. This article argues that underlying conceptual issues hinder cumulative research on consociationalism to centripetalism. The reformulation of these concepts as "institutional packages" and their grouping under the label "power-sharing" have resulted in conceptual instability. Instead of contributing to gradually closing the controversy, empirical studies consequently lead to the proliferation of debates about case classification. Having identified these issues, the article formulates five recommendations to reassemble the concepts in a way that fosters constructive discussions in the field.

Introduction

Giovanni Sartori's[1] call for political science to turn into an applied science akin to engineering was well-received in the field of democracy in divided societies. An often heated and heavily normative debate emerged between two "rival" schools of "institutional engineering" for ethnic conflict management—consociationalism and centripetalism. Each approach prescribes a distinctive "institutional package" to manage ethnic conflict and consolidate democracy in deeply divided societies. While "consociationalists" recommend grand coalitions, mutual vetoes, proportional representation (PR), and segmental autonomies,[2] "centripetalists" favor preferential voting systems that create incentives for forming multi-ethnic coalitions at the center.[3]

Despite half a century of debates, the literature on institutional design for ethnic conflict management is still in search of consensus. A survey of US-based political scientists in the field of comparative politics finds that only 29% of respondents saw consociationalism as a solution to ethnic conflict—with 36% disagreeing.[4] As the author notes, "though it was not asked, it is unlikely that a statement of Horowitz's integrative approach, the main alternative, would elicit greater support given that it is less well-known."[5] While far from unique in the social sciences, this absence of agreement is problematic for a field that aims to formulate policy recommendations. Indeed, the credibility of scientific theories depends on the existence of scientific consensus about them.[6] Simply put, policymakers may wonder why they should trust policy prescriptions that remain controversial among experts.[7]

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In line with Sartori's attention to conceptual clarity as a precondition for comparative research, this article identifies conceptual issues as key barriers to the advancement of cumulative research on consociationalism and centripetalism. While other difficulties may exist, this focus is warranted since "stable concepts and a shared understanding of categories are routinely viewed as a foundation of any research community."[8] Because concepts are "Data containers," clear definitions are a prerequisite for Data collection.[9] Well-crafted typologies allow researchers to build comparative research designs, inquire into multiple causal pathways to the same outcome, and formulate "contingent generalization" of the findings from specific cases to broader types[10]—exactly the tasks required to compare the consequences of different types of power-sharing.

This article asks: How were consociationalism, centripetalism, and power-sharing assembled into a unified conceptual framework, and what are the implications of this process for cumulative research on ethnic conflict management? This question is investigated by mapping the controversy[11] about consociationalism and centripetalism, building on a broad review of the qualitative and quantitative literature on the topic. The concepts are critically assessed, building on the literature on concept formation in political science in the tradition of Giovanni Sartori.[12] To map the extensions of consociationalism and centripetalism (that is, all the "real-world" cases denoted by these concepts) in a manageable way, a review of a sample of 18 key publications was conducted. The selected contributions are either publications that introduced the concepts under study or important reviews of the evolving field by authoritative authors in each school (Arend Lijphart, John McGarry, and Brendan O'Leary for consociationalism; Donald Horowitz and Benjamin Reilly for centripetalism). These publications were selected at roughly five-year intervals (with some margin of maneuver) to capture evolutions over time, forming a "timelapse" of the universe of cases covered in the literature.[13]

The article argues that the way the concepts of power-sharing, consociationalism, and centripetalism came to be assembled throughout their history created conceptual instability, which hinders the advancement of cumulative research on ethnic conflict management. Originally distinct empirical concepts, consociationalism and centripetalism were reformulated as normative prescriptions (taking the form of "institutional packages") and grouped under the label "power-sharing" to form a typology. These two translations resulted in important conceptual instability, which limits our ability to formulate comparative research designs to empirically test the normative claims of consociationalism and centripetalism in a way that is broadly accepted in the field. Far from contributing to the gradual closing of the controversy, empirical studies indeed lead to the proliferation of debates about case selection, research design, and the validity of empirical findings.

While conceptual issues in consociational theory have been the object of various studies,[14] this article contributes to the literature by critically examining the evolving relationship between the concepts of consociationalism, centripetalism, and power-sharing. The objective is not to engage in (not least resolve) the controversy between consociationalism and centripetalism; more modestly, the article aims to identify conceptual issues that need to be addressed *before* this controversy can be closed. Neither is the argument that we should abandon the concepts of consociationalism and centripetalism; rather, the hope is that, knowing what the issues are, we

can use them in ways that are more conducive to the advancement of cumulative research on institutional design in divided societies. To that effect, the conclusion formulates five recommendations on how to reassemble the concepts of power-sharing, consociationalism, and centripetalism to address conceptual unsettlement in the field.

Assembling the concepts

Consociationalism, centripetalism, and power-sharing were not always part of a unified conceptual framework; their definitions and their relationships have evolved over time. Originally distinct (although related) empirical concepts, consociationalism and centripetalism were subsequently reformulated as "institutional packages" and brought together under the label "power-sharing." This section reviews the entangled lives of these three concepts.

Distinct origins

The concept of "consociational democracy" was formulated in the late 1960s as *a type of democracy* encompassing "democracies with subcultural cleavages and with tendencies toward immobilism and instability which are deliberately turned into more stable systems by the leaders of the major subcultures."[15] The concept was empirical, and it enabled classification of democracies based on three definitional criteria: (1) a stable democracy, (2) a fragmented political culture, and (3) a "coalescent elite" (or "elite cartel").[16] Political accommodation in such a system is achieved thanks to elites' willingness to strike bargains in a grand coalition government including representatives of all major segments—a logic of "pillarization."[17]

Centripetalism emerged in the 1980s as *an approach to ethnic conflict management*.[18] Centripetalists questioned Lijphart's optimism about elite's willingness to cooperate, which "may require precisely the kind of pragmatism that is lacking among ethnic groups that see their vital interests threatened by other groups."[19] Horowitz, however, suggested that this willingness to cooperate could be created by electoral systems that incentivize ethnic parties to "pool votes" at the center, form a coalition of the moderate middle, and exclude extremists from power—a logic of "moderation."[20] Centripetalism, therefore, gathers conflict management practices that aim to "engineer a centripetal spin to the political system—to pull the parties toward moderate, compromising policies and to discover and reinforce the center of a deeply divided political spectrum."[21]

The normative turn

Because consociationalism and centripetalism are highly relevant for the practice of ethnic conflict management, both schools rapidly moved from inductive empirical studies to the formulation of normative prescriptions for "institutional engineering" in divided societies.[22] While Lijphart's initial articles were mostly descriptive, concerned with the typology of democracies, and attentive to prerequisites for—and downsides of—consociational democracy,[23] consociationalism was promoted much more vocally as a universal "model" and a "superior form of democracy" from the mid-1980s.[24] Similarly, Horowitz's originally cautious tone, presenting a menu of options without

hierarchizing them, gave room to more prescriptive injunctions in upcoming publications on centripetalism.[25] Soon enough, the two approaches were engaged in a heated debate. As McCulloch observes, "each model is marketed by its respective proponents as being of universal applicability for divided societies and as constituting the only (democratic) choice available."[26] The controversy reached its paroxysm during the negotiations for the South African constitution when both Lijphart[27] and Horowitz[28] published books recommending their own theory.

This normative turn did not only affect how scholars engaged with policy-makers; it also led to important transformations in both theories, materializing in particular in the reformulation of the initial definition of the concepts into institutional packages. In 1977, Lijphart redefined the "consociation" as a fourfold institutional package encompassing a grand coalition, mutual vetoes, proportional representation, and segmental autonomies.[29] Similarly, centripetalism was redefined as an institutional package encompassing electoral incentives for moderation (and, in particular, preferential voting electoral systems), arenas of bargaining, and coalitions of moderate parties.[30]These institutional packages serve both as *denotative definitions* aiming to classify the cases empirically and as *normative prescriptions* aiming to achieve stability in conflict-ridden societies.[31]

Typological reformulation

Once framed as rival approaches to ethnic conflict management, consociationalism and centripetalism were grouped under the overarching label "power-sharing" to form a typology. The current "typology of power-sharing" is thus a typology *de facto* rather than *by design*. It did not result from a deliberate attempt at mapping the universe of cases of power-sharing, but rather from a process where two initially distinct concepts were put in dialogue under an overarching label. Sisk introduced this approach by conceptualizing the "consociational" and "integrative" types as polar types in a typology of "approaches to power-sharing."[32] Reynolds[33] differentiates between a "consociational" and an "integrative" type of "power-sharing democracy." Reilly[34] discusses consociationalism and centripetalism as two "schools of thought." Horowitz[35] portrays consociationalism and his "incentive approach" as two types of constitutional design. McCulloch[36] notes that power-sharing can be institutionalized in a "direct," consociational way or an "indirect," centripetal way.[37] Trzciński[38] discusses "consociational" and "centripetal" "types of power-sharing" (alongside a third, "hybrid" category). Bogaards observes that "centripetalism versus consociationalism" reads a typical caption.[39] And the dichotomy is regularly used to map the "menu of options" for constitutional design in conflict-affected countries, such as Syria.[40]

The use of "power-sharing" as a genus encompassing consociationalism and centripetalism was, however, far from obvious. Indeed, this concept was (almost) absent from the political science literature until the mid-1980s. While "shared-power" had been used to refer to constitutional dispositions that prevent the monopoly of power by one actor,[41] the term "power-sharing" was previously only used in Northern Ireland, to refer to the Sunningdale agreement (Oxford Dictionary). Remarkably, the term power-sharing is thus nowhere to be found in the foundational *Democracy in Plural Societies*—apart from when Northern Ireland is discussed.[42] Lijphart started using

"power-sharing" as a synonym for consociational democracy in the early 1980s, judging the term more intuitive to policy-makers.[43] However, the definition of power-sharing was not settled. Power-sharing could thus *also* be used as an overarching label encompassing consociationalism and centripetalism.

To sum up, the initially-distinct concepts of consociationalism and centripetalism were assembled in a joint conceptual framework through their reformulation as "institutional packages" and their grouping under the label "power-sharing." These two translations were not without creating conceptual issues.

Conceptual instability

The way the concepts of consociationalism, centripetalism and power-sharing were assembled resulted in two conceptual issues: (1) the scope of the typology is not clearly specified because the concept of power-sharing does not neatly match its "types," and (2) the extension of the types have become unstable across studies because the "institutional package" definitions do not clearly delimit the boundaries of the concepts.

Under-specified scope

A first issue is that the concept of "power-sharing," which was brought *a posteriori* as an overarching label for the typology, does not neatly match the concepts of consociationalism and centripetalism.[44]

There is no scholarly agreement on the definition of power-sharing.[45] A broad definition, in line with Loewenstein,[46] conceptualizes power-sharing as the opposite of the concentration of power. Power-sharing would then be defined as "any set of arrangements that prevent one agent, or organized collective agency, from being the 'winner who holds all critical power,' whether temporarily or permanently."[47] Narrower definitions emphasize "joint political decision-making between the major ethno-political groups in divided societies."[48] Disregarding the definition used, however, power-sharing always appears both broader and narrower than consociationalism and centripetalism.

On the one hand, power-sharing is *broader* than consociationalism and centripetalism as it encompasses cases that fall beyond the scope of the concepts of consociationalism and centripetalism. Indeed, both theories rely on a set of scope conditions: they focus on power-sharing in the executive, in ethnically divided societies, and in regimes where elections are held regularly.[49] Even defined narrowly, the concept of power-sharing is not bound by these conditions. Power-sharing can take place in institutions other than the executive (for example, in security forces),[50] in societies that are not ethnically divided (for example, coalition governments in consolidated democracies using proportional representation),[51] across non-ethnic lines (for example, "gender power-sharing"),[52] and in undemocratic settings (for example, "authoritarian power-sharing").[53]

On the other hand, power-sharing is also *narrower* than consociationalism and centripetalism. Indeed, the "institutional package" definitions of both types include mechanisms that cannot be called "power-sharing"—even in a broad understanding of this concept. In the case of consociationalism, it is clear that while proportional

representation and mutual vetoes might lead to power-sharing, they are not power-sharing in themselves. Whether or not "segmental" or "territorial" autonomies should be considered forms of power-sharing is also contested in the field, with various datasets classifying power-sharing and autonomies separately.[54] Similarly, centripetalism's support for presidentialism or majoritarian electoral systems has led some to question whether it constitutes power-sharing at all.[55] Only one component of the institutional packages—the (grand or moderate middle) coalition governments—fits neatly within the concept of power-sharing.

Put briefly, consociationalism and centripetalism cannot rigorously be considered "species" of the "genus" power-sharing because the extensions of these concepts do not match.

Fading boundaries of the types

A second issue is that the definitions of consociationalism and centripetalism—which have been reformulated as "institutional packages"—do not clearly delimit the boundaries of the two concepts.

Indeed, the "institutional packages" definitions transformed the initial concepts into what Lijphart[56] called "models"—which can be understood, in more technical terms, as "prototypes." Unlike classical concepts, which include definitional criteria that real-world phenomena must *satisfy* to qualify as empirical referents, prototypes include a list of characteristic features that an empirical phenomenon must only *resemble* to qualify as empirical referents.[57] With these prototypical definitions, the degree to which a case should approximate the definition to be considered a valid instance of the concept is left unclear. A consequence of this transformation is the wide increase in the cases covered by each concept over time (Figure 1). While this expansion of the concepts is a testimony to the dynamism of the field and partly indicates the discovery or appearance of new cases, it also arguably resulted from the important concept-stretching engendered by the institutional package definitions.[58]

According to a strict interpretation of the institutional package definitions, defended by Lijphart, all the components of the institutional package should be respected for a case to qualify as a particular type.[59] However, such an interpretation leaves researchers with only a handful of cases in each type. Selway and Templeman[60] find only four full instances of consociationalism (Belgium, Spain, Austria, and South Africa); Kelly[61] finds five (Madagascar, Nigeria, South Africa, Belgium, Switzerland); and Schulte and Trinn[62] find two (Bosnia & Herzegovina and South Africa). Regarding centripetalism, Clark et al. note that "an obvious reason why so few studies have focused specifically on the impact of the alternative vote is that only a small number of countries around the world actually use this electoral system."[63]

To study a broader set of cases, most comparative researchers adopt a more liberal interpretation of the institutional package definitions, according to which cases that *approximate* the list of features are considered valid instances of consociationalism or centripetalism.[64] A relatively unproblematic way to do this is to formulate "diminished subtypes," that is, adding adjectives to a concept to *remove* rather than *add* definitional criteria.[65] Lijphart[66] introduced the term "semi-consociationalism" to refer to cases that included some, but not all, of the components of the consociational package.[67] However,

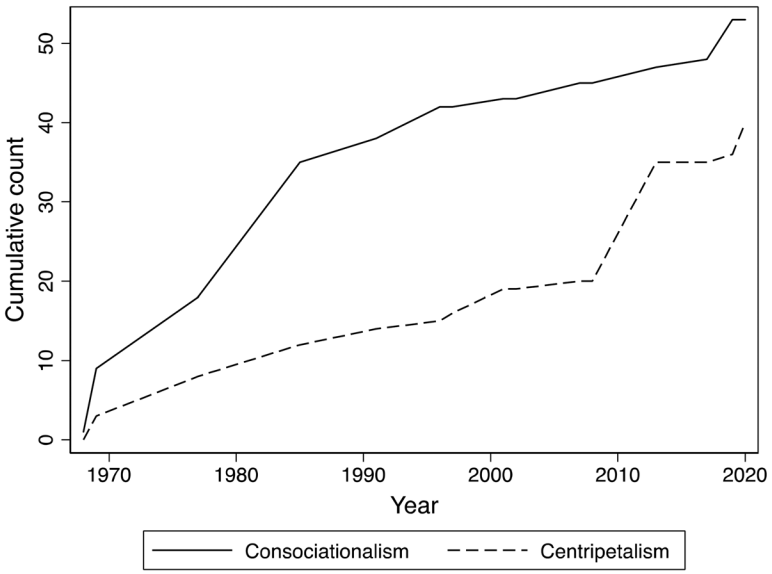

Figure 1. "Timelapse" of the cases of consociationalism and centripetalism in the literature sample (1968–2021).

the issue is typically dealt with less rigorously. Scholars tend to take cases that lack some of the components of the institutional package as full instances of each concept. For example, Northern Ireland (1998–) or Burundi (2000–) are commonly classified as cases of consociationalism, even if they do not include any form of cultural autonomy. Similarly, Lebanon (1943–1975) and Iraq (2005–) are considered instances of consociationalism, although they display only imbalanced coalitions and no mutual vetoes.[69] Nigeria is typically considered a centripetal system due to its distributional requirements for presidential election, but it does not display a centrist coalition nor preferential voting rules.[70]

Problematically, the instability of the "institutional package" definitions makes it possible for champions of each concept to opportunistically claim successful cases while rejecting cases of failures.[71] This issue is exacerbated by the fact that the criteria that should be approximated are themselves unclear and somewhat "elastic." As Halpern notes regarding consociationalism, the key concepts delimiting the type have "broad definitions" which are "incapable of producing exclusive categories."[72] Attempts at clarifying these definitions often result in a loosening of the criteria, allowing for more cases in the concepts. For instance, O'Leary refines the "grand coalition" criteria by distinguishing between "complete," "concurrent," and "weak" consociations, depending on whether the grand coalition enjoys total, majoritarian, or plurality support in each segment.[73] In a similar vein, Reilly[74] built an "index of centripetalism" distinguishing between "strong," "moderate," and "weak" centripetalism depending on how many elements of the institutional package are satisfied by a case. As a result of these reformulations, cases that differ from the institutional package in important ways can be considered valid instances of the concepts, albeit "weak" ones.

In brief, the reformulation of consociationalism and centripetalism as institutional packages made it unclear how close to the prototype a case should be to qualify as

instances of the two concepts. The boundaries of the types faded to the point of being difficult to locate, with direct consequences for empirical research.

Proliferating controversies

The conceptual issues identified above are not trivial. They prevent scholars from agreeing on research designs that could empirically test some of the normative claims formulated in the field. Consequently, empirical studies fail to contribute to the gradual settlement of the controversy and the formulation of policy recommendations rooted in a scholarly consensus. On the contrary, empirical studies lead to a proliferation of controversies about (1) which cases are part of the universe of cases, and (2) which cases qualify for membership in each type. These debates—which cannot be settled with the current definitions—allow scholars to contest findings unfavorable to the theory they champion.

Contested universes of cases

Due to the mismatch between the overarching label and its types, what constitutes a "case" for the purpose of this typology remains uncertain. Each scholar is left to make operational decisions independently when designing their studies, which leads to inconsistencies in the literature and controversies among scholars.

The universe of cases initially considered by Lijphart and Horowitz was relatively well bounded. Both theories limited their scope to "plural" or "deeply divided" societies, that is, societies that are both "ethnically diverse and where ethnicity is a politically salient cleavage."[75] Moreover, both concepts clearly apply only to democratic regimes, that is, polities qualifying for Robert Dahl's concept of "polyarchy."[76] Some comparative studies—including McCulloch, Selway and Templeman, Kelly or Schulte and Trinn[77]—respect this initial universe of cases.

However, other studies have broadened the universe of cases under consideration by dropping one or both criteria. This issue is most readily visible in the quantitative literature that is explicit about the universe of cases under consideration (Table 1)[78]—although it is also prevalent in the qualitative case study literature in a less explicit way (see below). On the one hand, some studies have broadened the concepts to include non-democratic cases of consociationalism and centripetalism.[79] On the other hand, some scholars expand the universe of cases by including ethnically homogeneous societies.[80] Finally, some studies include both democratic and undemocratic settings as well as divided and homogeneous places in their concepts of power-sharing.[81]

Disagreements about the extensions of the universe of cases open new controversies about the inclusion or exclusion of specific cases. For instance, Bogaards et al.[82] dismiss Kelly's findings with a sweep of hand because the universe of cases of consociationalism resulting from her careful operationalization does not match the universe of cases usually discussed in the qualitative literature. Similar controversies are frequent regarding case studies. Lijphart's classification of the Netherlands and Switzerland as consociations was criticized by scholars arguing that these cases were not actually deeply divided societies.[83] Whether or not Burundi should be considered a case of

Table 1. Universes of cases of consociationalism/centripetalism in the quantitative literature.

	Societal structure	
Regime type	Deeply divided	All
Democratic	Kelly (2019); Schulte and Trinn (2022); Selway and Templeman (2012)	Bingham Powell (1982); Krain (1998); Norris (2008); Cohen (1997); Saideman et al. (2002)
All	Cammett and Malesky (2012); Reynal-Querol (2002); Juon and Bochsler (2021)	Strøm et al. (2017); Hartzell and Hoddie (2007).

consociationalism is uncertain, given its lack of well-defined segments.[84] Finally, the inclusion of cases such as Afghanistan, the USSR, or Djibouti could be questioned, given their limited democratic track record.

Such enduring debates about the scope of the typology hinder progress toward a consensus on institutional prescriptions for ethnic conflict management because the findings of each study can easily be challenged by scholars arguing that some of the cases do not actually correspond to the minimal criteria required to be considered from inclusion in the universe of consociational or centripetal cases. Instead of moving toward cumulative findings, the literature remains stuck in disputes about case selection.

Disputed coding of the cases

The second issue is that, because the definitions of the types are unstable, there is considerable disagreement as to which cases should be considered instances of consociationalism or centripetalism.

The instability of the definitions means that cases are classified differently in different studies, the criteria for inclusion being different. As discussed above, cases are often coded as "consociationalism" and "centripetalism" when they satisfy some, but not all, of the conditions in the institutional package. Studies aiming to test the claims of consociationalism variously focus on PR electoral systems,[85] PR and parliamentary system,[86] PR and federalism,[87] or all three.[88] Kelly and Schulte and Trinn[89] are exceptions amid large-n studies in that they aim to integrate all elements of the consociation in their operationalization. Cases of centripetalism are also typically identified in comparative research designs based on a single criterion, which varies across studies: preferential voting electoral systems,[90] cross-ethnic voting,[91] or a coalition of the moderate middle.[92]

As a result of these inconsistent operationalizations, there is a broad overlap in the cases included. Out of 76 cases, 17 (22%) are disputed between the two theories (Table 1). While this overlap partly indicates that some cases include institutional features of both consociationalism and centripetalism,[93] it is also often the result of scholars disagreeing on the classification of cases. A case in point is India. Brass[94] remarked that India had achieved stability without being a consociation, disproving consociationalists' claim to hold the only model capable of achieving stability in divided societies. Lijphart,[95] however, replied that India (1947–1964), in fact, constituted an "impressive confirming case" for consociational theory, arguing that the Indian Congress party was informally fulfilling all four consociational criteria. Wilkinson[96] challenged this coding, arguing that India was consociational before independence (1919–1947) and after 1965, but not during the period studied by

Lijphart—challenging consociational theory by observing that the years where India was most consociational were also the most violent.

Similar controversies proliferated about other cases. Should we explain the success of Burundi's power-sharing in the early 2000s by its consociational character,[97] the centripetal dynamics triggered by its electoral system,[98] or rather by another, "associational" logic?[99] Is pre-war Lebanon's stability attributable to the consociational character of its political system,[100] or to "electoral system that encouraged moderation."[101] Should Lebanon's descent into war be blamed on consociationalism[102] or the fact that the consociational model was not fully implemented?[103] And are the inefficiency of the postwar Lebanese government due to its consociational design[104] or rather to the centripetal features of its electoral system?[105] Should the relative success of the Good Friday/Belfast agreement in Northern Ireland be explained by its consociational architecture,[106] or the centripetal dynamic triggered by its preferential electoral system?[107] Are the peaceful inter-ethnic relations achieved in Switzerland attributable to its consociational constitution[108] or to the centripetal aspects of its system?[109]

Disagreements about classification also hinder cumulative research by making it seemingly impossible to formulate uncontroversial comparative research designs to test

Table 2. Cases of consociationalism and centripetalism in the literature sample.

Consociationalism	Overlap	Centripetalism
Antilles (NL)	Afghanistan	Australia
Austria	Bosnia & Herzegovina	Bougainville
Beirut	Burundi	Canada (local level)
Belfast	Colombia	Comoros
Belgium	Cyprus	Djibouti
Brussels Capital Region	Estonia	Ecuador
Canada	Fiji	Ghana
Chile	Guyana	Guatemala
Czechoslovakia	India	Honduras
Ethiopia	Indonesia	Mauritius
European Union	Kenya	Mexico
Gabon	Lebanon	Nauru
Gambia	Malaysia	Nepal
Iraq	Nigeria	Nicaragua
Israel	Northern Ireland	Papua New Guinea
Italy	Sri Lanka	Peru
Ivory Coast	United States	Philippines
Kosovo		Rhodesia
Liechtenstein		Singapore
Luxembourg		Slovenia
Macedonia		Switzerland (local level)
Madagascar		United States (local level)
Netherlands		Uganda
New Zealand		
Portugal		
South Africa		
South Tyrol		
Spain		
Sudan		
Surinam		
Switzerland		
Tanzania		
USSR		
Uruguay		
Venezuela		
Yugoslavia		

the relative merits of consociationalism and centripetalism—which may explain the limited number of studies that have attempted to do so. McCulloch[110] is, to my knowledge, the only study that have conducted a controlled comparison of consociationalism and centripetalism. The study includes three cases of consociationalism—Burundi, Bosnia & Herzegovina, and Northern Ireland—and three cases of centripetalism—Fiji, Sri Lanka, and Nigeria. Case selection is carefully justified, so the design itself is not to be questioned. However, all of the six cases are claimed by both theories in the broader literature (Table 2). Consequently, scholars working with different definitions of the types could interpret the findings differently. For example, Reilly[111] argues that Burundi, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Northern Ireland actually present aspects of centripetalism, and could thus attribute the successes of these cases to centripetalism rather than consociationalism.

Because the boundary between consociationalism and centripetalism is unstable, a study's research design and findings are likely to be challenged by other studies based on broader or narrower concepts. The issue is *not* that different authors make different operational decisions, which are necessary to design any study; it is that the conceptual foundations of the field do not give sufficient guidance on how to operationalize these concepts and, therefore, provide little help to adjudicate classification disputes. Far from contributing to progress toward closing the controversy on institutional design for deeply divided societies, empirical studies thus tend to open new controversies about operationalization, case selection, and research design. Lost in this proliferation of controversies is the field's ability to achieve cumulative findings.

Reassembling the concepts

Few political science concepts have gained more popularity and policy-relevance than consociationalism, centripetalism, and power-sharing. Yet, the way these came to be assembled in a joint conceptual framework—where consociationalism and centripetalism are understood as types of power-sharing defined by institutional packages (Figure 2)—created conceptual instability and hindered cumulative research on ethnic conflict management. The issue, however, is not so much the concepts themselves than the way they have been connected to each other. Building on this analysis, this section thus formulates five recommendations on how to reassemble the concepts of consociationalism, centripetalism and power-sharing in ways that foster clarity and constructive discussions in the field.

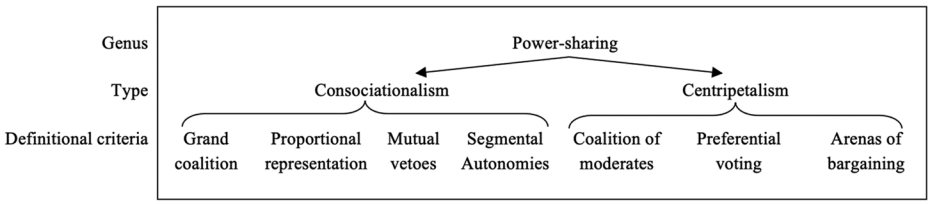

Figure 2. The existing conceptual assemblage.

Taken together, these recommendations compose a reassembled framework where consociationalism and centripetalism are conceived as *schools of thought* that formulate *policy prescriptions*, including *consociational* or *centripetal power-sharing* (Figure 3).

Each recommendation is illustrated using studies by McEvoy and McGarry and O'Leary,[112] which provide good examples of how the reassembled conceptual framework can be used for empirical research on the relative merits of consociationalism and centripetalism.

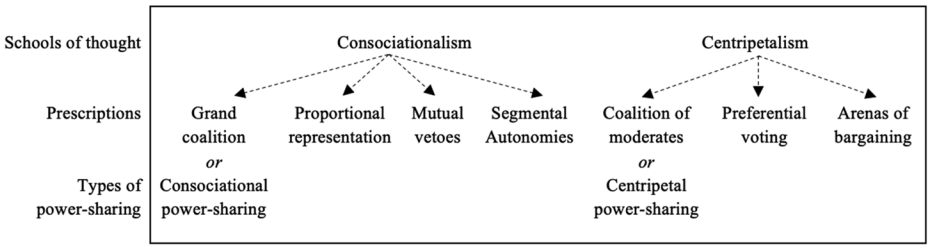

Figure 3. The reassembled conceptual framework.

(1) Use "consociationalism" and "centripetalism" as schools of thoughts, not empirical concepts

"Consociationalism" and "centripetalism," the article conclude, cannot be straightforwardly used as categories to classify real-world cases. However, there is nothing wrong with using these terms to refer to "schools of thought" that advocate different philosophies of constitutional engineering—one favoring "pillarization," the other "moderation"—and offer specific policy prescriptions. Rather than empirical concepts, these schools of thought are assemblages of normative commitments and theoretical assumptions that lead to distinct policy preferences. The institutional "mechanisms and practices" prescribed by each approach do not *define* them, but *derive* from their underlying logic. Following this perspective, McGarry & O'Leary describe consociationalism and centripetalism as the two "principal approaches to interethnic conciliation in severely divided places," characterized by different strategies for managing ethnic conflict: broad-based inclusivity versus "fending off the extremes."[113] Similarly, McEvoy identifies consociationalism and centripetalism as the "two principal frameworks for designing a new political framework in deeply divided territories after the termination of violent conflict,"[114] distinguishing by their respective "accommodationist" and "integrationist" philosophies of ethnic conflict management.[115]

(2) Use "power-sharing," not as an overarching label encompassing consociationalism and centripetalism, but as one of their prescriptions

As we have seen, power-sharing is not an adequate overarching label to encompasses consociationalism and centripetalism. Consociationalism and centripetalism are *not* types of power-sharing, nor is power-sharing a synonym for consociationalism. The only satisfactory way to relate the three concepts is to define power-sharing narrowly as a synonym for coalition government. In this sense, power-sharing can be understood as one of the *prescriptions* formulated by consociationalism and centripetalism. Both McEvoy and McGarry and O'Leary[116] adopt this approach. In line with Lijphart himself,[117] they use "power-sharing executive" as a synonym for coalition government.

In both cases, power-sharing executives are described as a prescription derived from the normative and theoretical commitments of consociationalism and centripetalism. It is clear, however, that power-sharing does not exhaust the set of mechanisms prescribed by the two schools of thought, which also include recommendations regarding electoral system design and territorial autonomies.

(3) To capture types of power-sharing, use "consociational" and "centripetal" as adjectives

While both consociationalism and centripetalism prescribe power-sharing, they favor different types of power-sharing—notably disagreeing on "who should share power and how inclusive the coalition should be."[118] To capture these differences without unsettling the semantic field, an option is to use "consociational" and "centripetal" as adjectives that *qualify* the concept of power-sharing. Adjectives add definitional criteria to a primary concept, which reduces the subset of empirical referents covered by the concept. Adding adjectives thereby enables moving down the ladder of generality by explicitly defining specific subtypes of a given concept.[119] The phrases "consociational power-sharing" and "centripetal power-sharing" are thus not synonyms of "consociationalism" and "centripetalism"; rather, they capture the specific subsets of power-sharing cases that correspond to the prescriptions of each school. In line with this approach, both McEvoy and McGarry and O'Leary[120] start from the concept of power-sharing and then add adjectives to it to identify subtypes. While McGarry and O'Leary use "consociational" and "centripetal" power-sharing,[121] McEvoy[122] adopts a slightly different vocabulary distinguishing between "inclusive" or "consociational" executives[123] and "exclusionary"[124] or "moderate middle" executives.[125]

(4) Classify power-sharing cases based on practices, not institutions

Institutional packages, we have noted, do not allow for a clear distinction between "consociational" and "centripetal" power-sharing. Institutions associated with different schools are often blended in real-world cases, and power-sharing is one of the components of the institutional packages. A more appropriate classification criteria—in line with the classical literature—is consociationalism and centripetalism's specific logics of ethnic conflict management (that is, pillarization and moderation). Unlike institutional features, these logics are mutually exclusive. By identifying the dynamic at play in practice, we can classify power-sharing more confidently. Rather than a definitional criterion, the different ways in which each type of power-sharing type can be institutionalized becomes a question opened for empirical inquiry. McEvoy and McGarry and O'Leary[126] do not categorize power-sharing cases based on formal rules but rather on the actual configuration of the executive—most notably, how inclusive it is. In Northern Ireland, the Sunningdale executive appears clearly centripetal, as it included only moderate parties and excluded hardliners. By contrast, the executives formed after the GFA are distinctly consociational, as the coalition was broadly inclusive.[127] While the inclusivity of the executive is largely (although not entirely) influenced by institutional rules, the classification ultimately hinges on observable practice—who is in government and who is in opposition—rather than on the rules themselves.[128]

(5) Focus empirical comparative studies on prescriptions, not schools of thought

As theoretical and normative schools of thought, consociationalism and centripetalism are unobservable and, therefore, cannot be directly "tested." Empirical research must instead focus on their empirically observable *prescriptions*. One way to implement this approach is to design studies that test conditional hypotheses in the form: "If one approach is correct, then X should be observed." Such empirical studies would tend to disaggregate the "institutional packages" and examine the effects of specific components independently.[129] McEvoy and McGarry and O'Leary[130] adopt this strategy. Their empirical investigations do not attempt to test centripetalism and consociationalism as wholes but rather compare the two approaches' prescriptions regarding power-sharing specifically. McEvoy' objective is "to understand power-sharing government in deeply divided places"[131] by comparing executives in Northern Ireland, Bosnia & Herzegovina, and Macedonia. McGarry and O'Leary seek to "assess the core centripetalists claim that executive rules which advantage moderates are superior to more inclusive consociational rules".[132] This approach could be reformulated as: "If consociationalism is correct, executives formed through sequential and proportional allocation rules should perform better than moderate middle executives."

The reassembled framework, these examples show, provides a sound theoretical foundation for cumulative research on institutional design for ethnic conflict management. Comparing specific prescriptions of each school of thought provides a tidy way to assess their relative merits empirically. Rather than a single decisive test resolving the overall controversy, this approach however calls for *several* tests to evaluate different empirical implications of each school of thought. Over time, this process may lead to one school prevailing over the other as evidence accumulates in its favor. Yet, by identifying the conditions under which each school's prescriptions work best, this strategy may end up doing more than just settle the controversy. Who knows? It may even manage to reconcile consociationalism and centripetalism.

Notes

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Agreements and Their Implementation," *Peacebuilding* 1, no. 2 (2013, 1989–2007): 256–74. The Territorial Governance (TERRGO) dataset; Christoph Trinn and Felix Schulte, "Untangling Territorial Self-Governance–New Typology and Data," *Regional & Federal Studies* 32, no. 1 (2022): 1–25. *Classify territorial arrangements in a separate category from power-sharing*.

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80. Bingham Powell, *Contemporary Democracies*; Krain, "Contemporary Democracies Revisited"; Norris, *Driving Democracy*; Cohen,"Proportional versus Majoritarian"; Saideman et al., "Democratization, Political Institutions."
81. Importantly, these studies do not claim to be testing consociational theory. However, they make clear references to Lijphart's theory, which justifies their inclusion in Table 1. Strøm et al., "Inclusion, Dispersion, and Constraint"; Hartzell and Hoddie, *Crafting Peace*.
82. Bogaards et al., "The Importance of Consociationalism," 350.
83. van Schendelen, "The Views of Arend Lijphart"; Barry, "Political Accommodation"; Daalder, "The Consociational Democracy"; Adriano Pappalardo, "The Conditions for Consociational Democracy: A Logical and Empirical Critique," *European Journal of Political Research* 9, no. 4 (1981): 365–90.
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113. McGarry and O'Leary, "Power-Sharing Executives," 498; see also: McGarry et al.,"Integration or Accommodation?," 69; Kuperman,"Designing Constitutions," 3.
114. McEvoy, *Power-Sharing Executives*, 19.
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117. Lijphart, "Power-Sharing versus Majority Rule," 412; Lijphart, "The Puzzle of Indian Democracy," 39.
118. McEvoy, *Power-Sharing Executives*, 21.
119. Giovanni Sartori, "Guidelines for Concept Analysis," in *Concepts and Method in Social Science: The Tradition of Giovanni Sartori*, edited by David Collier and John Gerring (New York: Routledge, 1984), 97–150; Collier and Mahon, "Conceptual 'Stretching' Revisited"; Collier and Levitsky, "Democracy with Adjectives." For instance, in "consociational democracy," the adjective "consociational" is used to delimit a subset of democracy cases that display a consociational logic; Lijphart, "Consociational Democracy."
120. McEvoy, *Power-Sharing Executives*; McGarry and O'Leary, "Power-Sharing Executives."
121. McGarry and O'Leary, "Power-Sharing Executives," 497.
122. McEvoy, *Power-Sharing Executives*.
123. Ibid., 22.
124. Ibid., 21.
125. Ibid., 40.
126. Ibid.; McGarry and O'Leary, "Power-Sharing Executives."
127. McEvoy, *Power-Sharing Executives*, 22; McGarry and O'Leary, "Power-Sharing Executives," 504–5.

128. Other examples include Bosnia & Herzegovina and Lebanon. While both present some 'vote pooling' institutional features – which are associated with centripetalism – the dynamic observed in each case is clearly consociational, since centripetal incentives are successfully evaded in practice; Daniel Bochsler, "Four Ways to Avoid Centripetal Effects. How Political Actors Escape Institutional Incentives in Divided Societies," *Democratization* 27, no. 8 (2020): 1458–76; Salloukh,"The Limits of Electoral Engineering in Divided Societies"; Mitchell,"The Single Transferable Vote and Ethnic Conflict."
129. While this study focuses on power-sharing, the same approach can be applied to the other mechanisms prescribed by each school. This approach has been implemented in the qualitative literature focusing for instance on veto rules; Allison McCulloch and Aleksandra Zdeb, "Veto Rights and Vital Interests: Formal and Informal Veto Rules for Minority Representation in Deeply Divided Societies," *Representation* 58, no. 3 (2020): 427–42; or ethnic quotas, Karen Bird, "Ethnic Quotas and Ethnic Representation Worldwide," *International Political Science Review* 35, no. 1 (2014): 12–26. It is also common in the quantitative literature, which has for instance focused on the effect of specific electoral systems; Hanne Fjelde and Kristine Höglund, "Electoral Institutions and Electoral Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa," *British Journal of Political Science* 46, no. 2 (2016): 297–320 or self-governance mechanisms; Trinn and Schulte,"Untangling Territorial Self-Governance." An advantage of this approach is that it allows us to conceptualize each dimension more precisely – addressing the key issue of 'conceptual elasticity' present in the literature; Halpern, "The Disorderly Universe."
130. McEvoy, *Power-Sharing Executives*; McGarry and O'Leary, "Power-Sharing Executives."
131. McEvoy, *Power-Sharing Executives*.
132. McGarry and O'Leary, "Power-Sharing Executives," 498.

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