Conflict Resolution Institutions, Political Accountability and Electoral Behaviour: Performance based voting in ‘very unclear’ consociational conditions

Abstract
One institutional response to conflict resolution relates to the implementation of consociational arrangements. Such a response is hotly contested with regard to its implications for party competition: proponents argue that such arrangements incentivise party moderation while critics argue that consociational structures, because they are based on the underlying conflict, buttress rather than ameliorate the conflict. Consociationalism is also contested with regard to the extent to which the institutional structure facilitates or hinders ordinary voters holding the government to account. In a fully-fledged consociational system all of the parties in the system share power in a coalition government and there is no Opposition. This begs the question: what do voters do if they want to vote for the Opposition and there isn’t one? If voters are dissatisfied with the performance of the power-sharing executive how exactly are they to cast their vote in order to ‘hold the government to account’? Critics argue that the non-existence of an Opposition undermines the notion of political accountability. Proponents argue that accountability is still possible via rewarding/punishing the particular parties in the power-sharing executive which performed particularly well/badly. This paper focuses on the case of Northern Ireland and uses evidence from an election study conducted in the wake of the 2011 Assembly election (at the end of a four year term of consociational government including all the main parties: DUP/UUP/Alliance/Sinn Fein and the SDLP). The paper empirically investigates:

- the extent to which voters think that aspects of life in Northern Ireland (economy, education, health, policing, political stability, provision for Catholics, provision for Protestants) have got better or worse over the last four years
- the extent to which voters attribute responsibility to the powersharing government for these changes
- the extent to which voters attribute responsibility to particular parties in the powersharing government for these changes
- the extent to which evaluations and government/party attributions interact to drive voting behaviour.

I conclude with a discussion of the extent to which performance based models of voting actually work in the consociational Northern Ireland context and tease out the implications of these findings for our evaluations of the extent to which the consociational institutional response to conflict facilitates or hinders political accountability.

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