"Tribal Trenches":
A Qualitative Critique of Consociational Design in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

How does consociational power sharing impact ethnic divisions in Northern Ireland? Though those in the consociationalist school would claim that the lack of active political violence in Northern Ireland is a powerful argument in favor of consociationalism; I argue that active violence has been replaced by increasing political polarization and ethno-national tensions. Using data gathered from twenty-four semi-structured interviews in Northern Ireland, this project critiques the hypothesis that ethnic divisions lose their salience after the implementation of consociational power-sharing agreements after ethno-nationalist conflict. Despite the growing literature on the long-term effects of consociationalism, scholars have largely focused on quantitative methods, overlooking qualitative approaches. By presenting an ethnographically based critique of consociationalism, I hope to approach this gap in the literature. This research was generously funded by both the Stetson University Research Experience Grant and by the Stetson Honors Program.

Introduction

> The Belfast Agreement was a political fudge because it didn't actually address the issue of the land. It said that if people sign up to work together politically, then all will be reasonably well, we can look forward to progress, whatever that means. And yes, the violence largely disappeared, the economy has staggered along, but as we have seen, when pressure comes politically, then tribes revert to their identity (Reverend Thomas, July 25, 2017)
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> I think that now, more than ever we're seeing a real brazen attempt by both parties to play constitutional issues and others to get people into more tribal trenches (Nichola Mallon, July 17, 2017).

While the guns have been quiet for almost twenty years in Northern Ireland, the sectarian division that spurred the Troubles lives on. During the height of the Troubles, this division was expressed through violence. Now, ethno-national actors have moved from the bomb to the ballot box. As exampled in the two quotes above, sectarian political division has become the status

quo. Through the consociational design of the Northern Irish executive, identity has been codified in the constitution and political process (Taylor, 2006). Consociationalism, or ethnic power sharing, has designated ethno-national identity as a valid political orientation. Political parties act as "ethnic tribunes", focusing on issues of ethnicity rather than issues of cross-community interest (Dixon, 2011; McGlynn et. al, 2014).

How does consociational power sharing impact ethnic divisions in Northern Ireland? Through a qualitative study of twenty-four elite and non-elite interviews conducted between June and July 2017, I posit that consociationalism has in fact exacerbated tensions. Rather than a silver bullet for ethno-nationalist tensions, consociational design has institutionalized ethnic identity, empowered ethnic tribune parties, and led to an institutional neglect of the "other".

Literature Review

Theoretical Basis of Consociationalism

Consociational democracies are a form of power sharing in divided societies first engineered in the 17th century, popularized by Arend Lijphart in the 1960s (Saurugger, 2014). Distinct from majoritarian democracies, consociational democracies share the four following traits: grand coalitions, mutual veto, proportionality, and segmental autonomy (Sircar, 2006).

Despite the face-value common sense of consociational design, it is not without its critics. Paul Dixon writes: "The objection to consociationalism, then, is not so much its four prescriptions but consociationalism's theoretical framework – primordialist, segregationist, elitist – in which these prescriptions are to be interpreted" (2011, p. 312). Rather than the reduction of ethno-nationalist cleavages, consociationalism is said to lead to increased ethnic bloc voting (Taylor, 2006). While violence has diminished in Northern Ireland, the ethnic tensions that led to the Troubles are alive, well, and encouraged by the consociational process.

History of Northern Irish Troubles

Dating back to exclusionary laws passed in the 16th century after the Plantation of Ulster by British settlers, the Catholic Irish faced discrimination in the north of Ireland. In 1920, the island of Ireland was partitioned into the independent, mainly Catholic/Irish/nationalist south and the two-thirds Protestant/British/loyalist north, a self-governing region within the United Kingdom (Phoenix, 2017). While the Troubles have many causes, the constitutional status of Northern Ireland has been the most important issue for both sides since the partition of 1920. Predominantly Catholic nationalists yearn for a united Ireland, while predominantly Protestant unionists want to maintain the union with the United Kingdom (MacGinty et. al, 2012).

After centuries of brewing conflict, sectarian violence escalated in the 1970s. At this point, the conflict was described as "a three-cornered conflict between the British Army and a militarized police force (at one stage c. 30,000 personnel); the Irish Republican Army (IRA, c. 1,000 personnel) and other smaller pro-united Ireland militant groups; and pro-United Kingdom militant groups (c. 1,000 personnel)" (MacGinty et. al, 2007, p. 4). One part-time soldier in the Ulster Defense Regiment (UDR), a branch of the British Army, stated: "It was really bad, there were bombings, shootings nearly every day" (Dawson, 2014, p. 273). Ultimately, 3,700 people were killed and 40,000 people were seriously injured by the time of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, a significant number considering the small population of Northern Ireland (Deiana, 2012).

History of Consociationalism in Northern Ireland

The history of power sharing in Northern Ireland as a way to alleviate sectarian tensions began with the Sunningdale Agreement of 1974. The agreement, mediated in late 1973, lasted all of six months before internal divisions within the unionist and nationalist communities

waylaid the agreement (McDaid, 2016). After Sunningdale and several other unsuccessful

attempts at self-government, Northern Ireland agreed upon the Good Friday, or Belfast

Agreement (the Agreement) on April 10, 1998. The Agreement was primarily championed by

the Social Democratic and Labor Party (SDLP), the "moderate" nationalist party, and the Ulster

Unionist Party, the "moderate" unionist party. Finally, the Agreement was reached by popular

vote in 1998 (MacGinty et. al, 2012).

The Agreement contained three strands. Strand One creating a consociational Assembly

and Executive, Strand Two creating North-South institutions cooperating with the Republic of

Ireland, and Strand Three creating East-West institutions cooperating with the United Kingdom.

Finally in the Agreement, any decision as to the constitutional status of Northern Ireland would

rest not with the Assembly, but with the electorate (Northern Irish Assembly).

The setup of the Assembly as established in the Good Friday Agreement draws heavily

from Sunningdale. The deputy leader of the SDLP went so far as to call the Agreement

"Sunningdale for slow learners" (Hancock, 2008, p. 203). The Assembly holds 108 Members of

the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), elected by Single Transferrable Vote proportional

representation (Wilford, 2000). Each MLA must designate themselves as "Unionist,"

"Nationalist," or "Other." These designations are used when special voting is triggered that

requires cross-community support, a key tenet of the consociational setup. Within the Executive,

parties are allocated ministries proportionally through the d'Hondt method, while the first and

second largest party choose the joint First Minister and Deputy First Minister (Murtagh, 2015).

Post-Good Friday Agreement Politics

In its brief life, the Assembly has had a tumultuous history. The Assembly was

suspended from 2002 to 2007 until the implementation of the St. Andrews Agreement. The

Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Fein agreed upon the St. Andrews Agreement, which restored devolution in the region (Northern Irish Assembly).

The roots of the 2002 failure of devolution and subsequent St. Andrews Agreement lie within the transferal of power from the more-centrist SDLP and UUP to Sinn Fein and the DUP. After the 2005 election in which both the DUP and Sinn Fein consolidated their majorities, Ian Paisley, the head of the DUP, "announced that they represented the 'burial' of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement on which the peace process is based, and he ruled out a return to a power-sharing assembly" (Sluka, 2009, p. 281).

After this bold statement from Paisley, power sharing was restored in May 2007, when Sinn Fein acknowledged the Police Service of Northern Ireland as legitimate and the DUP accepted power sharing with the St. Andrews Agreement (Owen, 2006). Most recently, power sharing has been suspended since January 2017 over the involvement of Arlene Foster, the current DUP First Minister, in the failed Renewable Heating Initiative. As of December, there is no agreement in sight. Sinn Fein is currently demanding that the Irish language be recognized as an official language, which the DUP is not likely to agree on (McDowell, 2017).

The current conflict over cultural and political issues in the context of a constitutional government falls in line with some of the main arguments against consociationalism. As Sluka states:

> While so- called 'terrorism' and armed conflict have been reduced, part of the cost has been the movement of electoral support away from moderation and towards more militant wings of unionism (the DUP) and nationalism (Sinn Fein)... (2009, p. 297).

Most recently, the debate about Brexit has been particularly relevant in Northern Ireland. Though most in Northern Ireland voted to Remain, the lack of a working Assembly has

diminished the capacity of Northern Ireland to have a seat at the table during the governmental talks over how Brexit would proceed. As Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK with a land border with Europe, how would Brexit affect Northern Ireland? Would Brexit mean the return of a hard border with the Republic of Ireland? Questions surrounding Brexit abound, and the lack of a working Assembly has done nothing but complicate these questions (O'Hagan, 2017).

Criticisms of Consociationalism in Northern Ireland

In 1975, after the failed Sunningdale Agreement, Lijphart himself discounted consociationalism as a viable option for Northern Ireland. He stated that Northern Ireland lacks three factors "conducive to consociational democracy": a balance of ethnic power, norms of grand coalitions, and national solidarity (p. 100-1). He held that view until 1995, when the IRA ceasefire and consequent Good Friday Agreement proved a victory for consociationalists (Dixon, 2011). Criticisms of the consociational setup of Northern Ireland abound, but the most relevant include: the essentialist nature of consociationalism, the prevalence of ethnic tribune parties, and institutional neglect of the "Others."

Perhaps the most interesting critique of consociationalism involves the essentialist assumptions that consociational scholars make. Following structural identity theory, one's identity is "socially constructed and changes over the life course" (White, 2010, p. 342). Furthermore, "'ethnic groups' are defined by the context in which they find themselves… Ethnic identity can be crafted from within a group as a response to a changing political environment or the frustrations of the modern industrial state" (Denny and Walter, 2014, p. 200). It is naïve to believe that ethnic identities will lose salience immediately after a conflict, but it is essentialist to assume that they will always remain fossilized.

While the goal of consociationalism is that such identities would eventually lose their salience, the means by which that would occur are unspecified. While it is important to acknowledge that Sinn Fein and the DUP have moderated their positions by embracing modern electoral politics, they still function as ethnic tribune parties (Whiting, 2016; Mitchell et. al, 2009). According to McGlynn et. al, ethnic tribune parties act by "rallying supporters to their badge on the basis that only they can maximize the benefits for 'their' community" (2014, p. 275). As Evans and Tonge write in 2013, "electors and parties across the two ethnic pillars concur on economic and social priorities, such as jobs and housing, but select 'Green' (Catholic–Irish–Nationalist) or 'Orange' (Protestant–Unionist–British) parties" (p. 364).

While the construction of the Northern Irish Executive grants the same powers to the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, whether the First Minister is designated as Nationalist or Unionist still matters deeply. In the 2010 General Election, Sinn Fein's vote share outpaced the SDLP by 9%. That year, 61% of the electorate responded that Sinn Fein "has been the most effective voice for nationalists in Northern Ireland" (McGlynn et. al, 2014, p. 282).

It is not necessarily the difference in policy between the "moderate" and "extreme" parties that determines vote choice, but rather, the perception that the "extreme" parties are the heavyweight defenders of their community. In 2009, Mitchell et. al found: "three times as many respondents perceived Sinn Féin rather than the SDLP to be the most effective party in representing the interests of nationalists (p. 411). Among unionists, they found similar phenomena (Mitchell, 2009). Voters elect these "extremes" as the voice for their community due to the perception that they are the most effective.

While "moderate" parties such as SDLP and UUP are left behind by ethnic tribune voting, non-sectarian parties such as the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland (APNI) are also left

behind by the consociational setup of the Assembly. As of 2015, 43% of the electorate identified as neither unionist nor nationalist, yet unionist and nationalist political parties represent 90% of the vote (Murtagh, 2015, p. 545). In the 2016 election, Alliance maintained their eight seats, but lost support in every constituency (Bertoldi, 2016). This phenomenon is largely attributed to the culture of politicized ethnicity; even if a person doesn't actively identify with an ethnic group, they will still vote for the party that most closely represents their ethnicity (Murtagh, 2015).

While the electorate is an issue for the cross-ethnic parties, the institutional design of the Assembly proves an insurmountable obstacle. The process of cross-community vote and mutual veto mean that the designation of "other" holds little to no significance. In 2001, three APNI members were re-designated as Unionist rather than Other in order to shore up the Unionist majority for a cross-community vote (Taylor, 2006). Ian O'Flynn states: "By effectively discounting the votes of the 'others' on certain important issues, the agreement privileges national over individual identities" (Taylor, 2006, p. 217). One APNI member said that trying to legislate as a cross-ethnic party was akin to being in the "middle of a tribal dog fight" (Murtagh, 2015, p. 559). By not providing an institutional method for cross-ethnic parties to thrive, consociational design falls short in its aim to decrease the salience of ethnic tribune parties.

Through these three arguments, critics of consociationalism argue that it amounts to voluntary segregation (Dixon, 2011; Taylor, 2006). Through separate control of ministries and community control of cultural issues, what consociationalists call "segmental autonomy" (Sircar, 2006, p. 13), in fact works as de facto segregation. Rupert Taylor offers one of the more scathing rebuttals of consociationalism when he questions: "If notions of 'separate but equal' could not be intellectually upheld through any appeal to reason or developed through any

accepted principles of social organization in the American South or in apartheid South Africa, why should it be any different for Northern Ireland?" (2006, p. 219).

Defenses of Consociationalism in Northern Ireland

While consociationalism has certainly been heavily critiqued, it has also been heavily defended.   The core of this defense hinges on the lack of widespread sectarian violence and the moderation of Sinn Fein and the DUP. In Bosnia, another state in which a consociational agreement led to a ceasefire, Stroschein states: "Despite much criticism of the consociational structures established by the 1995 Dayton Agreement, the state has not collapsed again into violence after nearly 20 years" (2014, p. 112). In this argument, consociationalism is defined not by the presence of democratic norms, a functioning legislature, cross-ethnic voting, or any of the other lofty goals that consociational scholars claim, but merely by the absence of violence. This speaks to the use of consociationalism as a conflict management tool rather than a true tool for conflict resolution. The problem with consociationalism is not in its use as a tool of conflict management, but rather in its long-term use. Intended to be a transitional tool, the failure in consociationalism lies in its inability to articulate a means to ameliorate ethnic divisions.

While consociationalism may not designate a method to facilitate ethnic reconciliation, it points to the presence of ethnic cooperation as one of its defenses. Using the involvement of Sinn Fein and the DUP in the Assembly, consociational scholars cite the moderation of these once-unconstrained parties as a testimony to the efficiency of consociationalism. In this way, the bare minimum standard of peacekeeping is hailed as a victory of consociational design. This is not to belittle the enormity of the Agreement; to wage peace after almost forty years of waging war is no small feat. Rather, this is to say that twenty years after the cessation of violence, the political process has replaced the Armalite as the weapon of choice for ethnic actors.

Consociationalism in Comparative Perspective

Consociational thought has permeated the world of peacemaking, proposed as a "pragmatic" option for divided states. Consociational power sharing is actively utilized in Belgium, Burundi, Malaysia, Northern Ireland, South Tyrol, and Switzerland, and has heavily influenced the post-conflict constitutions of Bosnia, Cyprus, Fiji, Kenya, Lebanon, Macedonia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and Zimbabwe (McCulloch, 2014).

Of the above consociational nations, Bosnia-Herzegovina is perhaps the most compared to Northern Ireland. Both are European states in the early stages of recovering from an ethno-national conflict, and finalized consociational peace treaties with invested states as guarantors: Northern Ireland with the U.K. and Republic of Ireland, and Bosnia-Herzegovina with Serbia and Croatia. The contrast emerges in both the severity of the wars and the number of constituent groups involved. While Northern Ireland was a low-level armed conflict, the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina escalated to the point that many scholars consider it to be genocide. In addition, Northern Ireland has two main constituent groups: Unionists and Nationalists. Bosnia-Herzegovina contains three: Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks (Sircar, 2006). Despite these differences, the similarities are pronounced. Many of the consociational structures that draw ire in Northern Ireland are equally contentious within the constitutional design of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The marginalization of the "others", ethnic tribune parties, and continued political unrest attract criticisms from scholars (Stroschein, 2014).

Sri Lanka, another state with a consociational peace treaty, faces many of the same issues as Bosnia-Herzegovina and Northern Ireland. In particular, ethnically based electoral appeals are dominant in Sri Lanka. As Jensen writes: "both major political parties in Sri Lanka have catered to the Tamils when it fit with their electoral or governing interests" (1997, p. 24). In short, the

issues with consociational design span far beyond Northern Ireland. The continued salience of

ethnic tribune parties, essentialist nature of consociationalism, and institutional disregard of

"other" ethnicities permeate the essence of consociational democracies.

Methodology

Participants and Procedure

The data for this paper comes from twenty-four semi-structured interviews conducted

between June and July of 2017. The audiotaped interviews lasted between ten and sixty minutes,

and were conducted in the location of the participant's choosing. Interviews were conducted in

participant's offices, coffee shops, and even the Member's Café at Stormont Parliament

Building. Data were then imported into Quirkos, a qualitative data software package, where they

were coded by theme and relevancy. All participants were guaranteed confidentiality with the

exception of four elected officials, who kindly waived their right to confidentiality.

Participants for this study were recruited through cultural, historical, religious, and

political organizations. Participants ranged from church volunteers to Mike Nesbitt, the former

leader of the Ulster Unionist Party. While interviews were largely conversational, a semi-

structured interview guide was constructed to direct the flow of discussion and keep the

conversation centered on identity and consociational design. Questions included: "Do you

believe that the importance of sectarian divide has diminished over your lifetime?"; "What do

you think caused the shift from the UUP and SDLP in favor of the DUP and Sinn Fein?"; and "In

your opinion, why are people voting on 'orange and green' issues instead of 'bread and butter'

issues?" (Interview Guide, Appendix).

Instead of focusing on either the unionist or nationalist community, I chose to conduct a

cross-community, national study. This is a unique decision, as most qualitative surveys of

Northern Ireland choose to focus on one community in a confined geographical space as a pragmatic decision (Zenker, 2006; Panzer, 2015; McAuley and Tonge, 2008). In contrast, my respondents ranged the religious spectrum from Protestant to Catholic to Pagan, and the geographical spectrum from Derry to Belfast to North Down. While this approach did limit my depth of community immersion, it made up for it in breadth. By taking classes and living at Queen's University Belfast, Northern Ireland's top university, I was able to gain legitimacy as a student researcher that I would not have obtained as an independent American.

While the breadth of my study is one of its strengths, it is also one of its weaknesses. I was able to speak to four current or former MLAs: two Alliance, one SDLP, and one UUP. I was not, however, able to arrange an interview with any DUP or Sinn Fein officials. As this paper specifically critiques Sinn Fein and the DUP, interviews with party leaders would have greatly aided my analysis. However, the interviews with party officials in smaller parties and other elites were still diverse enough that I am confident in my results.

Qualitative Methods: A Defense

Since the rise of advanced quantitative data analytics, the field of political science has become increasingly quantitative. In the subfield of American politics, the growing divide has been stark. In the 1970s, 42% of articles about Congress mentioned methods such as interviews or participant observation, whereas only 15% of articles since 2010 have mentioned such methods (Curry, 2017, p. 115). Curry warns: "If the use of these methods continues to decline, we may no longer study certain topics—and we also may lose insights and information that are difficult to uncover using purely quantitative approaches" (2017, p. 118). Qualitative methods are not a substitution for quantitative methods, but rather, an augmentation that can help us to

further understand the human element of quantitative data. In other words, qualitative methods can help us to recognize the political elements of political science.

Similarly, the vast majority of the consociational literature in Northern Ireland is quantitative, based on the comprehensive electoral data available in the area. My use of qualitative data is not to disregard this wealth of quantitative data, but to enhance critiques of consociationalism through a combination of elite and non-elite interviews. Supplementing quantitative literature with ethnographic fieldwork gives political scientists the opportunity to gain insights that raw quantitative data cannot provide alone.

Findings and Analysis

Through my interviews, I analyze the ways in which consociational power sharing has affected the political and social dimensions of post-Troubles Northern Ireland. In particular, this paper will delve into the institutionalization of ethnic identity, prevalence of ethnic tribune parties, and institutional neglect of the other inherent in consociationalism.

Institutionalization of Ethnic Identity

My findings on the impact of consociationalism on ethnicity fell in line with the existing literature critiquing consociationalism (Dixon, 2011; Denny and Walter, 2014). Dr. Stephen Farry, the Deputy Leader of the Alliance Party and MLA for North Down, stated:

> You have this paradox now, that the Good Friday Agreement and the peace process has actually hardened identity… Basically the Agreement has essentially institutionalized sectarianism. It treated identity in 1998 as a fixed point rather than something that was fluid and could change. It assumed that there would be a permanent Protestant-Unionist identity and a permanent Catholic-Nationalist identity, and that the two would have to coexist. And therefore, they built in the structures that would have to give voice to them,

but didn't really recognize any other kind of voice … Sometimes it's easier for peacemakers to freeze conflict and manage it rather than to try to transform it. The freezing can then become really frozen. (Dr. Stephen Farry)

Farry falls in line with the literature on the essentialist nature of consociationalism when he states that consociationalism "freezes ethnic conflict." The essentialist nature of consociationalism makes it impossible to move past the conflict. Likewise, "Reverend Thomas" echoes:

No matter what you make of power sharing, it entrenched sectarianism, it entrenched division. You have to nominate yourself as either being unionist, nationalist, or other. You have to define yourself… ("Reverend Thomas")

By requiring one to define oneself as unionist or nationalist in perpetuity by default causes ethnic divisions to replicate. By not providing a viable alternative to the unionist/nationalist dichotomy, the Agreement ensures that the division will remain salient. Will Glendinning, a former Alliance MLA, states:

The Good Friday Agreement has been extremely good at providing a structure for us to deal with, at a governmental level, the divided structure of our society. It was also necessary for us to cement the peace, in terms of reducing the level of violence. What it didn't do was deal with the identity issues: dealing with the past, parades, flags, and paramilitaries, which are the issues that are now there (William Glendinning).

In this way, it is not necessarily the structure of the Agreement, but it's shortsightedness. While the Agreement ended the war, it did not necessarily end the conflict. The Agreement, while essential to end the violence, did not contain the long-term structures that would ameliorate

ethnic tensions, and has in fact amplified tensions through the institutionalization of identity

inherent to the consociational structures underpinning the Agreement.

Ethnic Tribune Parties

In addition to the institutionalization of ethnicity, my findings reflect how the

consociational structures of the Agreement have empowered ethnic tribune parties. Nichola

Mallon, the deputy leader of the SDLP and MLA for North Belfast, states:

> I think that more than ever we're seeing a real brazen attempt by both parties to play
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> constitutional issues and others to get people into more tribal trenches. I think that what
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> we have seen is that the center ground, in this past Westminster election in particular, was
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> badly impacted upon (Nichola Mallon)

In using the phrase "tribal trenches", Mallon is hearkening back to both the primordialism

underlying consociational design and the ways in which ethnic tribune parties are quick to use

that to their advantage.

Since the Agreement in 1998, the DUP has moved from 20 to 28 seats in 2017 (Whyte,

2002; BBC). Sinn Fein has advanced from 18 to 27 seats (Whyte, 2002; BBC). Meanwhile, the

UUP and SDLP have declined by 18 and 12 seats, respectively. Dr. Farry explains the move

towards tribune parties by stating:

> To an extent, both DUP and Sinn Fein have moved to the center. They're not where they
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> were 25 years ago… To some extent they've taken over the SDLP and UUP's territory,
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> but you also have the electorate seeing them as being the stronger voice in each
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> community. So it's what [scholars] talk about when they write about ethnic tribune
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> parties on either side of the divide who are there to broker outcomes in a transactional
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> process rather than create some sort of a notion of a shared, coherent, cohesive

government. They're there to represent their different blocs. So if your politics is going

to be divided into blocs, you're as well having the stronger voice in your bloc, so you'll

be able to stand up to the equal but opposite voice in the other community. (Stephen

Farry)

Not only does Dr. Farry reference the literature on ethnic tribune parties; he also talks about the

"notion of a shared, coherent, cohesive government." The perceived impossibility of

cooperation amongst tribune parties is closely associated with the institutionalization of ethnicity

under the Agreement.

By designating candidates as "unionist", "nationalist", or "other", the choreographers of

the Agreement were all but guaranteeing that the existing ethnic divisions would give rise to

tribune parties (Mitchell et. al, 2009). While the violence has ended, the ethnic divisions remain

salient through the consociational design of the Assembly. While the political process includes

all relevant parties in the conflict, fear is still a significant component of modern electoral

politics in Northern Ireland. As Reverend Thomas states:

So why do you vote for these people? You vote for them because they're making you

fearful that the world will end if the other lot gets in... Neither the SDLP nor the UUP

were able and still are not able to articulate why people should vote for them, and not the

other party. The policy differentials between say, the SDLP and Sinn Fein, in practice,

are minimal. So, as the DUP and Sinn Fein have said, 'we are the heavyweight operators

in our communities,' why would anyone vote for someone who A, can't dislodge them,

and B, really has no credible alternative to offer the electorate? ("Reverend Thomas").

Likewise, Mike Nesbitt echoes this idea of block voting, stating:

As I see it, you basically now have unionists who don't even necessarily like the DUP

voting DUP because they are fearful of Sinn Fein becoming the First Minister; they

always want a Sinn Fein Deputy First Minister, even though it's an equal office… So it

seems to me that people vote DUP or Sinn Fein not because they think these are the two

parties that can come together and make a big impact on how we deal with our crisis in

the National Health Service, or will deliver a better education system for our children, or

actually deliver anything except cancel each other out. So there's a realization that

them'uns on the other side are gonna have a big block called the DUP or Sinn Fein,

therefore we have to make sure us'uns have a big block to cancel them (Mike Nesbitt).

Both Nesbitt and Reverend Thomas articulate the core of ethnic tribune parties: that they are

ethnic actors that "lie beyond the formal political sphere, within the informal structures of ethnic

politics" (Murtagh, 2015, p. 545). Within these informal structures, fear and the realities of

tribune politics weigh heavily on the electorate. As Bishop John states:

Even moderate nationalists will say, 'to be on the safe side, let's vote for Sinn Fein.' And

a moderate unionist will say, 'to counter that, I'll vote for the DUP' (Bishop John).

Ethnic tribune parties are not about changing the status quo of government; they are about

control. Unionists seek to maintain their control, while nationalists seek to gain control. As

Glendinning states:

The last Westminster election shows that we're heading towards polarization and a

benign apartheid because the vote… showed people voting for a party not necessarily

because they believed that party, but because that party is the one they see will stand up

to the other. So there's still a lot of defining yourself by who you're not (Will

Glendinning).

In the term "benign apartheid," Glendinning joins the ranks of critics of consociationalism in maintaining that consociational design separates rather than accommodates.

Institutional Neglect of the "Other"

Murtagh writes: "In the landscape of 'ethnic politics' in which parties mirror the divisions in society and vie for votes only within 'their own' ethnonational group… parties that attempt to straddle the divide inhabit a perilous position" (2015, p. 545). According to recent electoral returns, that sentence rings particularly true for the Alliance. While ethnic identification is down, with only 57% of the electorate identifying as either unionist or nationalist, traditionally unionist or nationalist political parties still garner 90% of the vote (Murtagh, 2015, p. 545). Bishop John reconciles this disconnect succinctly, stating:

> With the demographics in Northern Ireland right now, it's almost fifty-fifty, so the small parties get squeezed out in elections. It's kind of like an arm wrestle between the two parties, and there's no such thing as a three-person arm wrestling match (Bishop John).

In short, even if one does not actively identify with an ethnic tribune party, one will still vote for the identity that most closely resembles their heritage. Reverend Thomas delves more deeply into the issue, stating:

> This is where Alliance is floundering, because, and I used to be an Alliance voter, and I can't think of a single issue where their party position is not reflected in either Sinn Fein or DUP to some extent… no matter what you are or aren't in favor of, at the end of the day you are presented with an identity choice, not a choice about moral differentials, it's an identity choice. ("Reverend Thomas")

By once again referencing the lack of meaningful policy differentials, Reverend Thomas reiterates the importance of ethnicity in vote choice.

In addition to the barriers within the electorate, cross-community parties face institutionalized barriers as well. If the Alliance were to garner enough votes to claim either the First Minister or Deputy First Minister spots, nation-wide chaos would ensue. As Dr. Stephen Farry answers:

> SKH: Out of curiosity, what would happen if Alliance were to take one of the First Minister spots?
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> Stephen Farry: Anarchy, absolute anarchy. Technically, we could claim one of the posts, but whichever community was bumped out, that would cause tensions. But that's part of the problem with the setup; it assumed that unionists and nationalists would exist in perpetuity. They never really thought that far ahead… How would the structures cope with that?...

In this quote, it becomes obvious that the three main issues facing consociationalism in Northern Ireland: institutionalization of identity, ethnic tribune parties, and neglect of cross-ethnic parties, do not exist in isolation. Instead, these factors interact and build off of one another in a vicious cycle.

Defenses of Consociationalism

While almost all respondents critiqued the consociational Assembly, many respondents had intricate views of consociational design. As Dr. Stephen Farry states:

> It's one of those things with cause and effect, the Good Friday Agreement didn't cause these divisions, but it probably makes it harder to move along (Stephen Farry)

While consociational design did not create the sectarian divisions that haunt Northern Ireland, neither has it assisted in the latter parts of the peace process. While it did end the violence, it has

not dealt with the more pervasive cultural conflict facing Northern Ireland. Will Glendinning states:

> [The Agreement] was necessary for us to cement the peace, in terms of reducing the level of violence. What it didn't do was deal with the other issues: dealing with the past, parades, flags, and paramilitaries, which are the issues that are now there. So I would say that the problem is that it hasn't been fully and properly implemented… And I think there are things that need to be changed inside of it, to make it to work… (Will Glendinning)

The pitfalls of consociationalism lay not in the short-term conflict management, but in the lack of institutionalized mechanisms for long-term conflict transformation. Despite the lack of violence, the issues of nationality that spurred the conflict have not been dealt with under the Agreement.

Conclusion and Discussion

While the combat in Northern Ireland is over, the conflict lives on via political means. Consociational power sharing has prevented a return to violence, but at the cost of an effective government. As of March 2018, there has been no sign that the Assembly would reconvene after a more than yearlong impasse. One SDLP lawmaker went so far as to tell the New York Times: "I don't mean to be dramatic or anything, but I do think the Good Friday Agreement is effectively dead," (Kingsley, 2017). Under consociationalism, Northern Ireland has been embattled by the institutionalization of ethnicity, ethnic tribune parties, and neglect of the other.

This is a turning point for Northern Ireland. With the ghosts of the Troubles and the looming specter of a solidified border from Brexit, the peace cemented through the Good Friday Agreement will either sink or swim. Let us only hope that the region will not return to the violence that marked it twenty years ago.

My research uncovered a number of further questions. How has Brexit affected identity? How would a single-community study have affected my findings? How would my findings been affected if I had been able to interview a party official of Sinn Fein or the DUP? These questions would be interesting additions to the literature.

Through the institutions created in the Good Friday Agreement, Northern Ireland has gone from a nation mired in war to a nation mired in cultural conflict.   While conflict of the cultural variety is preferable to the armed variety, the mere absence of violence is not a high enough bar for transitional societies. By applying principles of conflict management as opposed to principles of conflict transformation, long-lasting reconciliation is overlooked in favor of post-conflict stagnation. The shortsighted consociational framework of the Good Friday Agreement has led to institutionalized ethnicity, tribune parties, and neglect of cross-ethnic parties, none of which are conducive to the peaceful and cohesive society that Northern Ireland hopes to become.

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