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# Alternation, Inclusion and the European Union

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## ABSTRACT

Current endeavours to employ the concept of consociational democracy in European Union research are misleading. This critique starts from a minimalist concept of democracy with alternation and inclusion of preferences in government formation as a parsimonious way to measure the extent to which political systems are majoritarian, consensual or even consociational in character. It then presents empirical results for the current EU member states and examines whether the European Union can be analysed in a similar way by using equivalent indicators. Despite a superficial resemblance to consociational systems, a crucial variable is missing in the EU: the formation of a stable grand coalition enclosing all institutions involved in decision-making. What has been wrongly termed consociationalism at the European level is best regarded as intergovernmentalism.

## KEY WORDS

- alternation
- consociational democracy
- inclusion
- institutional analysis
- intergovernmentalism

## Introduction

In recent years, European Union (EU) researchers have increasingly employed comparative politics concepts to shed more light on the way this political system works (Dowding, 2000; Hix, 1994, 1999; Milner, 1998; Schmitter, 2000). One of these is consociationalism (Hug and Sciarini, 1995; Lijphart, 1999: 42–7; Schmidt, 2000; Taylor, 1990). Although it is a laudable venture to merge the comparative and international politics literatures, the surplus value of such an enterprise can only be realized as long as concepts are rigorously operationalized. I will argue that current endeavours to employ the concept of consociational democracy in European Union research are misleading.

One problem is that most concepts originating in comparative politics are holistic in character. They are meant to capture political systems in toto. The EU, however, as Fritz Scharpf (2002) convincingly argues, is a complex of different modes of governance. He distinguishes between four such modes:

- 1 Mutual adjustment of member states' policies anticipating interdependence effects in a Europeanized environment. This mode takes place without any recourse to the institutionalized European level of decision-making.
- 2 Supranational centralization of policy-making without any involvement by the member states or by the European Parliament. Here, the relevant actors are the Commission, the Central Bank or the Court.
- 3 Intergovernmental negotiations, with every member state having a veto on treaty issues as well as in some policy areas and a tendency to uphold unanimity in others despite a formal qualified majority rule.
- 4 Joint decision-making involving member states alongside supranational actors.

The concept of consociationalism can at best cover only the last two modes, intergovernmental negotiations and joint decision-making.

Two different uses of consociationalism by European integration scholars have to be distinguished. The first, more taxonomical, approach is mainly based on Arend Lijphart's definition and indicators of an ideal-typical consociational democracy (Lijphart, 1977). Here, the extent to which the EU can be characterized as consociational ought to be analysed by four yardsticks: the formation of grand coalitions of political forces at the central level; mutual vetoes of political leaders of participating collective actors (be it territorial units or social groups); (at least) proportional representation in central-level decision-making and proportional allocation of resources; and autonomy of the segments in relevant policy areas (again, territorial or functional). In fact,

in many cases authors refer rather informally to selective aspects of this concept (see also the debate between Bogaards, 2002, and Crepaz, 2002). This way, the real problems of applying the concept to the EU remain hidden behind some comprehensible analogies. The second approach uses consociationalism as a causal theory that aims at explaining why the EU has so far been able to survive and evolve despite its heterogeneity with regard to cultural, economic, geographical and social factors (Gabel, 1998). The EU, like the classical cases of consociational systems such as Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands or Switzerland, is an elite-driven system of conflict management and compromise-seeking, relatively shielded from popular demands. Therefore, so the argument goes, institutional reforms that aim at reducing the 'democratic deficit' in the EU may have unintended effects and undermine stability.

I will base my critique of consociationalist interpretations of the EU on the original, full-scale Lijphart version. It starts from a minimalist concept of democracy, with the two dimensions of government alternation and inclusion of preferences in government formation as a parsimonious way to measure the extent to which political systems are majoritarian, consensual or even consociational in character. I present empirical results for the current EU member states based on this concept. I then examine whether the European Union can be analysed in a similar way by using functionally equivalent indicators. As a result, despite a superficial resemblance to consociational systems, a crucial element is missing in the EU: the formation of a stable grand coalition of political actors enclosing all institutions involved in decision-making. In conclusion, I argue that what has been wrongly termed consociationalism at the European level is best regarded as inter-governmentalism combined with shifting coalitions of forces seeking consensus on an issue-by-issue basis.

## A minimalist concept of democracy

Starting from a minimalist concept of representative democracy in the Schumpeter tradition (Dahl, 1971; Przeworski, 1999; Schumpeter, 1942), political systems can be analysed according to two functions: first, to what extent voters are able to control government formation by electoral means,<sup>1</sup> and, second, how many individual preferences are represented in the government. The first function can be conceptualized as the alternation dimension, the second as the inclusion dimension of democratic political systems. In contrast to the current trend in empirical democracy research of concentrating on the inclusiveness of political systems, such a two-dimensional concept is capable

of integrating the recently neglected aspects of political competition and government turnover. These influence the degree to which a system is inclusive in the longer term. My hypothesis postulates that there is a trade-off between the two dimensions. If inclusion is high, alternation is low, and vice versa (see Figure 1).

Given this concept, consensus democracy is characterized by high inclusion and low or even zero alternation. This is all the more true with regard to consociational democracy where all relevant social groups are represented in government. Notwithstanding the fact that the two types of consensus and consociational democracy are slightly differently defined – the first as an institutional configuration, the second as a mode of political interaction between social groups (Bogaards, 2000; Kaiser, 1997; Lijphart, 1998) – they can be used interchangeably with regard to alternation and inclusion. At the opposite end of the trade-off line we find pluralitarian democracy (Nagel, 2000), where regular alternation takes place but governments are normally based on only a plurality of voters. Majoritarian democracy proper, that is, systems with governments that alternate from time to time and are based on a majority of voters, are placed somewhere in the middle. Note that in a few cases the levels

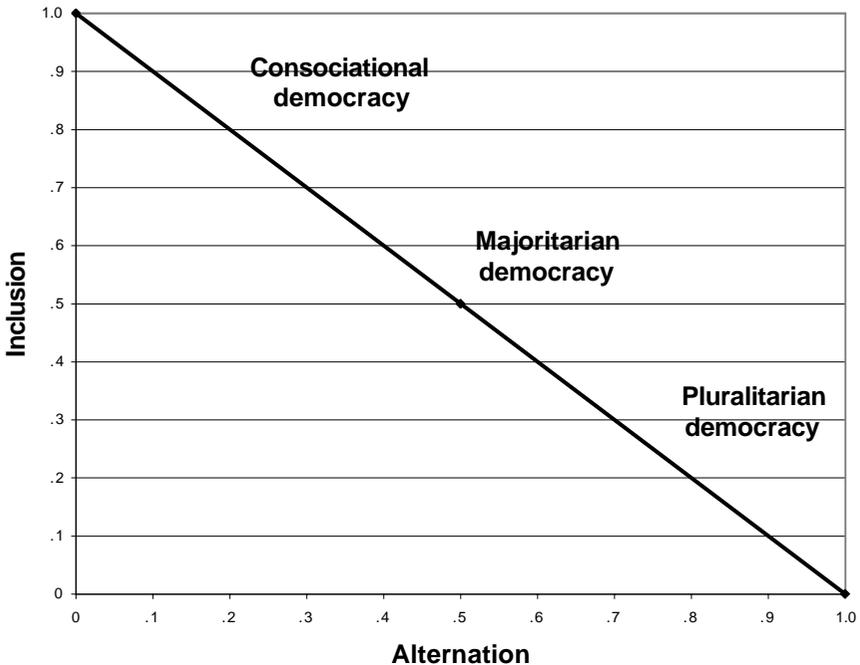


Figure 1 An alternation-inclusion concept of democracy.

of alternation and inclusion we actually find might be affected by other institutional features ignored here, since the concept is narrowly based on electoral democracy institutions. These features could be bicameralism, constitutional clauses with regard to government formation and decision rules in the legislature (see Strøm et al., 1994).<sup>2</sup>

## Alternation and inclusion in the EU member states

In order to apply this concept in comparative research, the two indicators have to be operationalized. As a parsimonious proxy, inclusion can be easily measured as the number of first preferences in a general election represented in government or, more briefly, popular cabinet support (Crepaz, 1996). A more refined indicator would have to be based on actual support of parliamentary bills. This modification would help draw a more realistic picture of the inclusiveness of political systems in times of minority government. At least in cases of stable legislative coalitions between the government and parties supporting it without formally participating in the executive, one could argue that the actual level of inclusion is higher than popular cabinet support indicates.

Alternation is more difficult to quantify. I propose a distinction between three operationalizations:

- *Alternation I* corresponds to the traditional understanding of the term. It is a dichotomous variable that defines alternation as a complete change of government (value = 1). Following from the fact that government changes of this kind are extremely rare and basically restricted to two-party systems or predominant-party systems, we have to develop more sensitive measures for comparative purposes.
- *Alternation II* is based on the concept of dominant party in government. Dominance is defined as controlling more than 50% of all government-controlled seats in the legislature. In the case of a change from one dominant government party to another, the value is equal to 1, as it would be for *Alternation I*. A change from dominance to non-dominance or vice versa is worth a value of .5.
- *Alternation III* is a modification of a proposal originally developed by Strøm (1990: 125). It is a more refined index than *Alternation II*, based on the aggregate seat shares of parties that change their status in the government formation process by either joining a government or leaving it. If all parties in government are new, the index value is 1; if no change occurs it is 0. Contrary to Strøm, however, I distinguish between governments

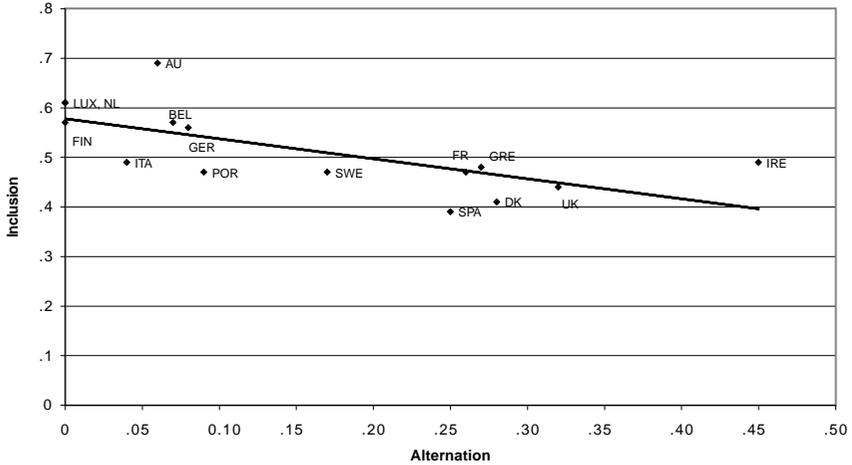


Figure 2 Alternation and inclusion based on *Alternation I* index.

with majority status and those with minority status. In the case of a majority government, what is relevant are the seat shares of parties participating in the coalition. If the government is in a minority, the index has to be based on seat shares in the legislature, because in this case other parties' parliamentary support is needed for decision-making.<sup>3</sup>

Inclusion is calculated on the basis of periods of office, whereas alternation is based on governments as units of observation. The rationale behind this is that in the latter case the relevant parameter is the number of instances when an opportunity arises for party political changes in government.

The results only for the relatively rough Alternation I and the more sensitive Alternation III measures are reproduced here, since the three indices are highly correlated (Pearson's  $r$ : AI with AII: .70; AI with AIII: .66; and AII with AIII: .83). Based on these measures we get the two-dimensional maps for the current EU member states shown in Figures 2 and 3.<sup>4</sup>

As expected, alternation and inclusion are inversely related.<sup>5</sup> The ranges for both are substantial. Whereas mean inclusion in Austria is 69%, it goes as low as 39% in Spain. We find the highest alternation rates in Ireland, with .45 for Alternation I and .39 for Alternation III. This means that, with every government formation, just under half the party political composition changes in this country. Other high-alternation countries are Greece and, not surprisingly, the United Kingdom. Finland, Luxembourg and the Netherlands show zero alternation rates on the Alternation I index, whereas Austria, Germany and Italy exhibit very low rates no matter which index we use.

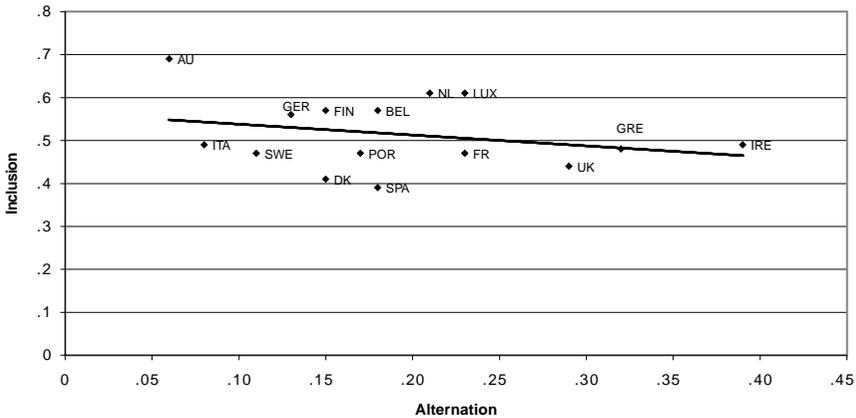


Figure 3 Alternation and inclusion based on *Alternation III* index.

### Alternation and inclusion in the European Union

Is it possible to interpret the European Union in this framework? Those who employ comparative politics concepts such as consociationalism implicitly assume that we can. Of course, the concept is derived from the Westminster system, in which government controls the majority of seats in parliament; that is, the executive and legislative functions are fused, so that the respective powers are divided not between institutions but between the political forces of majority and opposition. The application to non-parliamentary systems with an institutional division of labour, such as the presidential system of the United States, is more problematic. Since both the President and Congress need to approve a measure before it becomes law, inclusion is usually much higher than 50%. Alternation as change in the party political complexion of government is difficult to apply because both the President and Congress have fixed terms of office. Functional equivalents to alternation are changes from one unified government to another or at least from unified to divided government, and vice versa (Jones, 1994: 1–26). These could be considered to be changes in dominance as operationalized by the Alternation II index. As a result, we find that the United States, with high inclusion and low alternation, belongs among the more consensual democracies. This classification makes much more sense than Lijphart's proposal to interpret US presidentialism as belonging to the majoritarian camp (Lijphart, 1994).

In the case of the European Union,<sup>6</sup> also a non-parliamentary system, we again have to look for functional equivalents to the inclusion and alternation indicators. Inclusion can be measured in the same way as suggested for

presidentialism. Since the Commission, the Council and the Parliament are needed to make law – under different procedures (Tsebelis and Garrett, 2000, 2001) – and, in addition, most decisions are made under qualified majority rule, inclusion is very high. Of course, in the case of the EU we treat somewhat different qualities of representation of voter preferences as equivalent: by parties in the Parliament; by Commissioners, members of the Central Bank's executive board and members in the Court nominated by member states; and by member state ministers in the Council. Nevertheless, since the EU is another case of institutionally divided power, the decision-making rules establish high thresholds, and party systems in the member states differ significantly from each other, direct as well as indirect representation of voter preferences leads to an overall level of inclusion that is at any rate very high. This points to the European Union being a case of consensus democracy or, with respect to its heterogeneity in political-sociological respects, of consociationalism. So far, so good. But what about alternation?

Alternation implies competition between different and, at least temporarily, stable political coalitions. Even if stability is not as high in the US case as in a party government system, the Republican/Democrat cleavage structures political conflict to some degree. In the EU case, however, it is difficult to identify 'political camps' at the European level. Analytically we have to distinguish between individual institutions on the one hand and institutional interaction configured by the different decision-making procedures on the other. The Commission has always been composed of a number of social democrats and Christian democrats alongside one or two conservatives and liberals. The Council's composition depends on national elections and government formations and therefore is in constant flux. Here it has never been the case that one political camp clearly dominated. The same is true with regard to Parliament, where recent research based on roll-call analysis has shown that a Europeanized party system based on left-right polarization is slowly emerging, although different coalitions form on different issues (Hix, 2001; Kreppel, 2000). All this might lead to the conclusion that alternation is low because grand coalitions are formed in the Council, probably in the Commission,<sup>7</sup> and in many instances in Parliament between the large conservative and socialist party groups. However, as with inclusion, alternation has to be measured at the aggregate level. A dramatic change of coalitions between political camps is highly unlikely – a fact that seemingly confirms consociationalist interpretations.

Yet the consociational analogy is misleading. Case-by-case consensus-seeking, as we predominantly find it in the EU, is qualitatively different from the longer-term formation of grand coalitions of culturally segmented political camps that consociational theory seeks to explain and that the

alternation and inclusion indices try to capture. In particular, decision-making in the Council would be grossly misinterpreted this way. Coalitions of member states are formed on a temporary, ad hoc basis; these shift from issue to issue. Coalition formation is structurally induced by – at least – qualified majority rule. In addition, the positions of member states are exposed to shifts as a result of electoral politics and party political bickering at the national level.

What are the reasons for the relative weakness of the European policy level in mobilizing and aligning the differing national political camps into European blocs as a condition for the formation of stable grand coalitions? It has been argued that such a structuring of European politics is already emerging in the European Parliament. This may indeed be the case. However, from an informational perspective (Krehbiel, 1991), the fact that European party federations are increasingly dominating parliamentary life is driven not so much by the similar policy positions of the constituent parties on issues as by the search for an optimal legislative organization to process information and to acquire expertise. Since the saliency of issues differs markedly from country to country, EU party federations are fragmented into factions and are capable of exerting party discipline on constituent members to only a limited extent (Schmitter, 2000: 69). At least in public perception, the most salient issues are still fought out in the national arenas. It is debatable whether this assessment of the distribution of competencies ceased to be true some time ago. Nevertheless, the non-existence of a genuine European political public remains a major obstacle to strategies to reduce the democratic deficit of the EU institutional arrangements (Kielmansegg, 1996).

In theory, the decisive coalitions in European policy-making could change from case to case. Empirical research has found that, even after the procedural reforms since the Single European Act, formal decision-making in the Council is still largely unanimous (Hayes-Renshaw and Wallace, 1997). At negotiation stage, however, informal votes based on qualified majority rule are often taken to assess the constellation of national policy positions and the potential for compromises (Tsebelis and Garrett, 2001: 375). This points to the possibility that vote-trading takes place in many instances. Such behaviour is possible because the institutional patterns of parliamentary democracy are absent and heterogeneity leads to saliency differences on many issues (Mattila and Lane, 2001: 46, 49). Another reason for consensus-seeking beyond the rule-induced level of qualified majority stems from the fact that EU policies are implemented by the member states (Hix and Goetz, 2001: 7). Since all participants know that a member state opposed to a measure has little incentive to implement it properly, avoiding divisions is a rational strategy. It comes as no surprise that, in those cases where divisions take place at all, 'coalitions

change dramatically according to the item under discussion' (Dinan, 1994: 253). As a result we find that the two-dimensional concept of alternation and inclusion, although more difficult to apply than for parliamentary democracies, points to similarities of the EU to classic consociational systems with zero alternation and very high inclusion.

### Consociationalism and intergovernmentalism

Does this mean that those who interpret the European Union in terms of consociationalism are right? I remain unconvinced. The problem is that one of the four main characteristics – the formation of at least temporarily stable grand coalitions – is absent. It is absent because it is unnecessary. Coalition formation in the European Union is structured on the basis of two elements: first, decision-making rules and procedures with an extremely high threshold, and, second, intergovernmentalist behaviour even in situations in which divisions between a large majority and a small minority could take place. What has been termed consociationalism is far better understood as intergovernmentalism. Of course, with qualified majority voting as the formal decision-making rule on 'low politics' issues, intergovernmentalism has theoretically been left behind in the evolution of the European Union. In fact, defeated member states have the chance to transform 'low politics' issues into 'high politics' ones so that either the decision is revoked in essence or they get compensated for it in some other way. As a consequence, the coexistence of the decision modes of intergovernmentalism and qualified majority voting 'reproduces a "joint-decision trap" and . . . an impulse to find a compromise solution for each issue' (Hug and Sciarini, 1995: 71).

To be sure, this does not mean that I plead against the use of comparative politics concepts in European integration research. Intergovernmentalism has its place not only in international relations but also in studies on relations between the central government and state governments in federal political systems (Simeon, 1972). On the contrary, if we want to escape from endlessly reiterating the debate about the institutional logic of the EU – intergovernmentalism versus supranationalism or statism versus 'sui generism' – we would be well advised to accept that parallel logics are in place and to employ concepts as lower-level 'modules' (Scharpf, 2002: 69) that are also used in comparative politics and international relations.

The fact that consociationalism has taken the place of intergovernmentalism as a conceptual framework is no accident. Both concepts overlap to a large degree (Bogaards, 2002; Katz, 2001: 74). The three main characteristics defining consociationalism (Lijphart, 1977) – mutual vetoes of participating

collective actors on essential issues; proportional representation at the central level and proportional allocation of resources; and segmental autonomy – also apply to intergovernmentalism. The one characteristic that is missing in intergovernmentalism is the formation of a grand coalition at the central level. Such a coalition is by definition based on consensual politics in order to come to positive decisions. As we have seen, grand coalition formation would be a misnomer for what is going on at the European level. Finally, the fact that European policy-making is to some degree also driven by the Commission, the Court and the Central Bank as supranational actors and that Europeanized member states increasingly adjust their policies without any interference by EU institutions cannot be captured by either concept.

As a result there should be some hesitation before employing a concept in European Union research that cannot be rigorously applied. Even if the European Union may be on its way to becoming a real state, albeit a very special one, for the time being intergovernmentalism is a stronger conceptual framework for understanding how it works. However, the alternation–inclusion trade-off reported here for the different member states is not completely irrelevant. Since the European Union is a multi-level, multi-arena network (Grande, 2000), it should be of considerable interest to study the consequences of this national-level variance for European policy-making.

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## Notes

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- 1 This control mechanism leaves open the exact relationship between principals and agents. It can be either retrospective – voters sanction governments for their performance in the past term – or prospective – voters provide governments with an electoral mandate.
- 2 This concept, including its normative implications, is developed in more detail in Kaiser et al. (2002).
- 3 Let a legislature at date  $t$  consist of parties A (with a seat share in the legislature of 30%), B (30%), C (20%), D (10%) and E (10%). The government is composed of A,B. At date  $t + 1$  let the legislature consist of parties A (25%),

B (35%), C (20%) and D (20%). In the first scenario, the composition of government changes from A,B to B,C,D. Both governments have majority status. In this case the alternation value is calculated on the basis of government-controlled seats for both outgoing and incoming parties. The alternation index value is accordingly  $(.5 + .33 + .17) / 2 = .5$ . Given the same distribution of seats at date  $t + 1$ , now let the new government be a coalition of C,D in the second scenario. The alternation index has to be based on the majority status for outgoing parties and on the minority status for incoming parties. The alternation value is accordingly  $(.5 + .5 + .2 + .2) / 2 = .70$ . Although in this case the government changed completely, the alternation value is less than 1 owing to the fact that the new government has minority status only in the legislature.

- 4 In all cases except France, the data cover the part of the period 1950–2000 when they were democratically governed. In the case of France, the period covered is from 1958.
- 5 The very low  $R^2$  in the case of Alternation III points to the fact that, contrary to Alternation I, institutional factors are less important for the amount of change in government composition.
- 6 The relevant period here is after the Single European Act. Under the unanimity rule the concept does not make much sense, since the alternation dimension is undefined.
- 7 In this case we do not have direct information, given its secretive decision-making.

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