How Consensual *Are* Consensus Democracies?

A Reconsideration of the Consensus/Majoritarian Dichotomy and a Comparison of Legislative Roll-Call Vote Consensus Levels from Sixteen Countries

Brian D. Williams
University of California at Riverside

Abstract

In the following study, I develop two new institutional dimensions of consensus/majoritarian democracies, building on the variables of the two forms of democracy identified by Lijphart. Based on these two new dimensions, I establish a classification of consensual regime types and winnow out two permutations which would most closely approximate the ideal of domestic social conflict resolution, and could also more plausibly be explained by irenic cultural norms, rather than institutional mechanisms. Then I conduct an empirical investigation to assess whether there is a correlation between consensus or majoritarian democracies and average levels of legislative roll-call vote consensus acquired over time. My results suggest that proportional representation and ideological cohesion are not in tension with one another, as the opponents of PR would have us believe, and in fact may be more amenable to consensus building and ideological cohesion than their majoritarian counterparts. Interested researchers should aim to substantiate the correlation between consensual institutions and outcomes, and then conduct thicker investigations in order to determine whether consensual outcomes in consensus democracies can be explained by institutional mechanisms, or if, more ideally, irenic cultural norms might be at work.

Introduction: How Consensual *Are* Consensus Democracies?

When I initially began this research project I wanted to see if there was a correlation between proportional systems of representation and legislative roll-call vote consensus levels.[1] More specifically, I was interested in the following question: Are proportionately representative legislatures generally able to achieve higher levels of consensus in their legislative roll-call votes than majoritarian legislatures with "winner-takes-all" electoral systems? This question is interesting and important for several reasons, but perhaps the most intriguing facet of this research question is the grand, normative discussion it broaches. Building consensus on socially divisive issues may be understood as central to, if not synonymous with the process of resolving social conflict, in the abstract sense that as levels of popular agreement increase, the level of political division *decreases* commensurately. But the extent to which consensus building is indicative of the achievement of peace will also depend on how inclusive a given polity is when

---

[1] By "consensus levels" I simply mean levels of agreement achieved among government representatives within state legislatures. So, for example, a "simple majority" consensus level would be fifty percent plus one vote, while a unanimous consensus level would be when everybody agrees.

it comes to governmental decision making. For instance, a country could be ruled by a small group of rich, white, land-owning males, who often come to agree with eachother on matters, but the limits on both descriptive and substantive representation in such a body of representatives largely precludes a more genuine realization of domestic social conflict resolution. The essence of my argument is that a society which has both inclusive governmental representation rules and has achieved and sustained highly consensual outcomes in the policy making processes has more closely approximated the ideal of domestic social conflict resolution than other types of regimes. This assertion is inherently idealistic, and perhaps obvious: when everybody comes together and resolves their differences, peace will be achieved.[2] Of all possible types of governmental regimes, I would also assert that regimes which are both consensual in their institutional designs (i.e., those which grant representational inclusivity and leverage in policy formation processes), and consensual in their policy making outcomes, stand as the closest approximation to this pacific ideal. Therefore, the achievement and sustainment of such a regime should be the larger goal of a virtuous society.

Having identified this abstract, irenic goal, several questions arise. The idea that individuals are largely motivated by some conception of the common good, rather than more narrow interests, ought to raise a few eyebrows, given that such an idea would go against the grain of many theories which assume that actors are selfishly motivated. However, for those among us who would argue that entertaining such an idea is inherently quixotic, one might ask: would it be harmful to attempt to progress towards such an end *incrementally*, with the overarching goal of more closely approximating social conflict resolution, while "keeping our eyes on the prize" of peace and democracy along the way? How one answers this aforementioned question will largely determine the extent to which they would be willing to entertain the ideal end of consensus democracy, and would also seem to indicate their level of support for implementing consensual democratic institutional reforms in contemporary social contexts. Perhaps social division is something that needs to be *endured* rather than cured? A related question has to do with our ability to identify what motivates legislators when involved in the policy making process: Even if polities which were both inclusive in their institutional

---

[2] The achievement and sustainment of high levels of inclusion and agreement would also be indicative of a fuller realization of the democratic ideal, in the sense that such a polity would have more closely approximated a government which is "of, by and for the people", rather than being limited to "of, by and for *some* of the people". In this sense then, the ideals of social conflict resolution and a fuller realization of democratic idealism would coincide.

designs *and* were able to achieve and sustain high levels of consensus over time, can we say that political actors within such polities are motivated by the public good, rather than some more narrow interest? Ideally, consensual outcomes would be a product of shared irenic cultural norms, rather than institutional constraints placed on strategic actors with narrow interests. But how can we be sure that this later scenario is not the case?

In the following study, I attempt to address these questions. To do so, I begin by developing a typology of consensual regimes based on institutional characteristics of consensus democracy identified by Arend Lijphart in *Patterns of Democracy* (1999), as well as the average levels of consensus acquired by those regimes over a certain period of time. I argue that, irenic culture becomes a more plausible explanation of high consensus levels in consensus democracies, if these levels of agreement are comfortably above the level of consensus that could be explained by institutional mechanisms such as a separation of powers or the threshold for bill-passage. Countries which are consensual both in their institutions and their policy outcomes, and those whose representatives can be shown to be motivated by a desire to advance the public good rather than some more narrow interest, have more closely approximated the ideal of social conflict resolution.[3] Therefore, by identifying countries where such an explanation is more plausible, we provide ourselves with potential cases for thicker, qualitative analysis, which can hopefully yield institutional and cultural prescriptive insights for other polities interested in moving beyond, or ameliorating, political division.

What is Consensus Democracy?

Arend Lijphart's idea of "consensus democracy"[4] is a form of government with institutional structures that allow power-sharing to take place in politically heterogeneous and/or divided societies. According to Lijphart, consensus democracies empower ethnic, religious,

---

[3] One might ask what difference it makes whether a legislature is motived by narrow self-interests or some shared conception of the public good, as long as the public good gets advanced through consensual governance. To this I would conjecture that, closer approximations to the ideal of social conflict resolution would be more sustainable if the representatives were advancing these policies out of a genuine shared desire to bring about a more idealistic reality. In addition, if the representatives were not motivated in such a way, but rather were building consensus for narrow, selfish purposes, then one would rightfully ask whether the policies generating such broad support were themselves truly in the interests of the people.

[4] While Lijphart notes that he borrows the terms "consensus" and "majoritarian" from Robert G. Dixon, Jr.'s book *Democratic Representation: Reapportionment in Law and Politics* (1968), I refer to consensus democracy as "Lijphart's idea" primarily based on his development and use of the concept in *Patterns of Democracy* (1999).

linguistic, and/or ideological minorities by bringing them into the governmental decision making process and giving them leverage in the process of state policy formation. In his own words, "(The consensus model of democracy), instead of relying on pure and concentrated majority rule, tries to limit, divide, separate and share power in a variety of ways" (Lijphart 1996, 147). In *Patterns of Democracy* (1999), Lijphart identifies ten variables which determine whether a country is either a "consensus democracy", a "majoritarian democracy", or somewhere in-between. The institutional design of a *fully* consensual democracy would allow executive power-sharing to take place through the application of proportional representation to the executive office/branch, it would be a presidential rather than a parliamentary system,[5] the legislature would be bicameral rather than unicameral, the system would allow for multiparty governance, there would be proportional representation in the legislature (which I will refer to as PR in this essay), interest group corporatism (a system in which there are a few, large and powerful interest groups rather than many uncoordinated competitive interest groups), a federal intergovernmental arrangement with relatively autonomous regions at the more local levels, constitutionally enshrined checks and balances, a judicial review process, and centralized bank independence. Lijphart organizes these ten institutional variables into a "Executive-Parties" dimension and a "Federal-Unitary" dimension.

(Table 1 about here)

In this study, I reorganize these variables slightly into two new dimensions: a *Separation of Powers* dimension (which I will refer to as SOP) and an *Institutional Unity* dimension (which I will refer to as IU). Also, in this study I do not use all of Lijphart's ten variables. Instead, I use the variables from the SOP and IU dimensions which I find to be most directly relevant to legislative roll-call voting activity (which is what I focus on in the quantitative component of this essay), as opposed to the policy making processes of all branches and committees of consensus and majoritarian democracies. The institutional characteristics of consensus democracy *in the*

_____

[5] There is one caveat to this requirement for consensus democracy. Lijphart points out that while presidential systems are consensual in that they formally separate legislative and executive powers, thus creating a mechanism for a balance of powers between the executive and legislative branches of government, presidentialism also tends to foster a two-party system, because, generally speaking, only a candidate from a very large political party can win a presidential election and thus presidential systems tend to advantage and foster two-party majoritarian competition (Lijphart 1997, 147).

SOP dimension which I include in the quantitative part of this study include a presidential system of government in which the president and the legislature are elected separately, concurrent executive and legislative veto power over state policy, a federal intergovernmental arrangement in which the local regions have the ability to elect their own representatives independent of the central power, and a bicameral legislature where both chambers are elected publicly. Meanwhile, the institutional variables which I include *in the IU dimension* are: multiple parties in the executive, multiple parties in the legislature, a proportional system of representation in the legislature, and a low "effective representation threshold".[6]

(Table 2 about here)

I develop these new SOP and IU dimensions largely because the variables of consensus/ majoritarian institutions seem to fit into these two categories quite naturally and symmetrically. The main difference between these two dimensions is that, under a SOP, political actors or groups *are kept apart from eachother*, so as to promote a system of checks and balances. Meanwhile IU characteristics such as PR tend to bring the spectrum of political actors and groups *together*, so as to foster broad power sharing. Note that we would expect these two dimensions of consensus democracy to have disparate effects on consensus building within governments. The SOP arrangement was intended to serve as an institutional mechanism for preventing the formation of large tyrannical majorities, while IU is often thought of as a way to empower a wider array of political actors and groups within heterogeneous polities, and to give these groups leverage in governmental decision making processes, thus fostering broader consensus in legislative outcomes. The next part of this essay is dedicated to identifying the appropriate type of institutional design for the purposes of approximating the peaceful, more democratic ideal identified above. In order to more effectively do so, given the natural distinction between the SOP and IU dimensions, we should consider some of the permutations of these two institutional features.

---

[6] Simply put, this refers to the minimum percentage of the popular vote a party must acquire in order to gain access to the legislature. It is, however, distinct from a legally codified representation threshold. It is another way of assessing the proportionality of a given legislature. I will further describe this variable later in this essay.

A Typology of Consensual Regimes and
Possible Causes of Sustained Consensus Levels

Proportional legislative representation is only one facet of consensus democracies, and as was explained above, there are other variables within the IU dimension, as well as the SOP dimension which itself contains several individual characteristics which ought to be unpacked when considering consensual institutional features. Establishing a typology of consensus democracies can reveal important questions pertaining to the normative implications of the different types of democratic regimes, based both on the variety of consensual institutional ideal types and on the levels of consensus generated in legislative votes over time. Table 3 contains some of the possible types of consensual regimes, based on hypothetical combinations of the SOP and IU dimensions.[7]

(Table 3 about here)

Here we see some of the different types of consensual regimes, based on the average levels of consensus they achieve in their legislative votes, and some of the possible combinations of SOP and IU features. I've unpacked the SOP dimension first by distinguishing between regimes that are united (i.e., where the same party controls both chambers of the legislature as well as the executive) and regimes that are divided. I also split divided regimes into two ideal types: those where opposing majorities each control one of the legislative chambers, and those where the same party or coalition controls both legislative chambers while an opposition party or coalition controls the executive. I consider each type of SOP regime both with and without IU features (by which I mean PR *primarily*). Another type of consensual regime is characterized by IU but *not* a SOP. In the spaces corresponding to regime type and average level of legislative vote consensus, I provide some logical expectations of what those regimes might look like, and I consider

_____

[7] I should note that this typology is not logically exhaustive. For instance, in this typology I consider only the *horizontal* SOP between the different branches of the central government. I have not included the vertical (i.e., federal) SOP between the central government and the more local levels of governance. Nor do I make distinctions *within* the IU dimension, such as between countries with PR that have multiple parties, and those with PR that have fewer parties.

whether institutional mechanisms of the SOP and bill-passage threshold (I will refer to this simply as "threshold") can more plausibly explain those average consensus levels.[8]

Where a given polity has a low level of sustained legislative consensus, i.e., below the simple majority threshold, we cannot say that either the SOP or the threshold mechanisms are responsible for the consensus, because relatively low amounts of consensus are there to begin with.[9] One could assert that institutional mechanisms *prevent* the attainment of simple majorities, rather than cause them, and this may be the case. However, for now, I am interested primarily in explaining levels of agreement which comfortably surpass the consensus thresholds, rather than those which consistently fall below it.

Where the average legislative vote consensus level is at or around 50% (or some other level corresponding to a different threshold), one could not rule out the impact of the institutional SOP and/or threshold mechanisms as plausible explanations as to why these legislatures have on average sustained consensus levels at or around 50%.[10] Moving up to the high levels of consensus, we find the interesting puzzle. Among all ideal types of consensual regimes identified in my typology, the consensus threshold for bill passage and the checks and balances of divided government under a SOP can, at most, only serve as a partial explanation of the high average level of yes votes, as these votes have often comfortably surpassed the institutional thresholds for bill passage and veto pivots characteristic of the SOP. What explains the percentage of yes votes beyond that which is required for bill passage? Are there other institutional mechanisms which explain these high consensus levels? Can the power of political parties explain vote outcomes, for instance, by ensuring that only bills which will achieve a comfortable amount of consensus

---

[8] I refer to the SOP as an institutional mechanism for consensus, because it creates more potential scenarios in which there will be a divided government, which will increase the need for those oppositional parties or coalitions to negotiate on policies so that they can get them passed in both legislative chambers and avoid presidential veto. You will notice that, on my table, where there is a *united* government under a SOP, or where there is IU but *not* a SOP, I note that there will be no SOP mechanism effect on consensus levels. Meanwhile, the threshold for bill passage can be seen as an institutional mechanism for obvious reasons: political actors in favor a given piece of legislation must at least generate a level of consensus which surpasses that threshold for proposed bill to get passed. I assume that, when legislation is passed with a level of consensus at or around the threshold, we cannot rule out the threshold as a significant explanatory variable.

[9] One might look at the amount of yes votes generated on individual bills, of course, and thus find some votes upon which the amount of yeas ascend above the simple majority level. But for now, I focus on averages measure of legislative vote consensus levels over a period of time.

[10] Bear in mind that, in the data set which I develop for this paper, I've controlled for threshold by including only those legislative votes which require a simple majority of yes votes for bill passage. However, one could just as easily suggest, for instance, that consensus levels of 60% in the U.S. Senate can be explained by the filibuster cloture requirement.

will make it to the roll-call vote stage (Cox and McCubbins 2005)? Are there ways for legislatures to circumvent the legislative vote process, dealing with the more divisive bills in some other way?[11] Or, as I would argue, might irenic cultural norms help to explain these high levels of consensus, consistent with the idea that such legislatures are progressing towards, or have at least more closely approximated the resolution of political conflict in their polities? In order to answer this question, we would have to conduct thicker case study analyses. I will return to this point later in the concluding discussion to this essay.

Which Types of Consensual Regimes are
Most Amenable to Domestic Social Conflict Resolution?

Having identified this path for further study, let us consider which type(s) of consensus democracy would most closely approximate the democratic, peaceful ideal which I identified in the introduction to this essay. I've already explained why high levels of consensus on legislative policy outcomes are more consistent with the ideal of social conflict resolution, so we can begin by narrowing our focus to those regime types with highly consensual outcomes. Next, let us consider the SOP, which is one of the two main dimensions of consensus democracy. Would the SOP institutional features of consensus democracy be necessary, or even compatible, with the ideal form of democracy and a fuller realization of peace in the domestic sphere? In order to answer this question, we will, for now, focus on presidential and bicameral SOPs.

Lipset suggests that, "In the U.S. and other presidential systems, the representation of diverse interests and value groups in different parties leads to cross-party alliances on various issues" (Lipset 1996, 135). This would seem to suggest that presidential systems are preferable to parliamentary systems for the purposes of ameliorating domestic social division. In contrast, Lijphart emphasizes that systems of governance which combine both *parliamentary* and PR institutions tend to, "engage in broad consultation and bargaining aimed at a high degree of consensus" (Lijphart 1996, 157). We can also assess the utility of a SOP systematically by choosing the institutional ideal type under which the effect of the institutional mechanisms are

_____

[11] It has been observed that in some legislatures many policy proposals are not voted on formally by the legislative body. For instance, David Mayhew notes in his study of the U.S. Congress that, "the House Interior Committee churns out an enormous number of bills, and of the ones that pass the House about 95 percent go through without formal roll calls at all" (Mayhew 1974, 114). If roll-call were that rare in other countries as well, using legislative roll-call votes to assess how consensual a polity is would seem to be insufficient.

minimized, thus enhancing the prospects for a cultural rather than institutionally induced level of consensus. Referring again to my typology, we see that, for all regimes with highly consensual outcomes, the threshold for bill passage will be at most a partial mechanism, as the average level of consensus has ascended well above this minimal yes vote requirement. However, we can also observe that, under all four divided government ideal types, the SOP mechanism may also be a partial explanatory factor.

Still, we want to minimize the effect of the institutional mechanisms so as to increase the assurance that the consensus levels achieved are "natural", i.e., fostered by irenic cultural norms rather than institutional constraints. Therefore, we can further narrow down our list of potential ideal consensual regime types by not considering those regimes characterized by divided government. This leaves us to choose between a SOP system with a united government, as well as an IU system *without* a SOP. Now, we can further reduce our choices to the two with IU characteristics, and cross-out the regime of united government *without* IU. This requires some explaining.

Why would a polity which was characterized by IU and high legislative consensus levels more closely approximate the normative peaceful (and democratic) ideal than a state which was majoritarian on the IU dimension (e.g., by having plurality legislative elections)? After all, many have argued that polities which use a "first-past-the-post" electoral system are more desirable. For instance, arguing in favor of majoritarian elections, Quade avers that, "Plurality voting encourages the competing parties to adopt a majority-forming attitude. The parties incline to be moderate, to seek conciliation, to round off their rough edges—in short, to do before the election, in the public view, the very tasks that Lijphart applauds PR systems for doing after the election" (Quade 1996, 170).

Building on Quade's argument, we can posit the related point that, in either PR or plurality-based legislatures, a certain degree of cohesion needs to be developed for the purpose of passing legislation. In PR systems, this happens by establishing coalitions, while in plurality based electoral systems, one or maybe two of the prodigious "catch-all" parties will usually be large enough to form a majority sufficient in size for the purposes of governing. The main difference between PR and plurality systems, however, is found in the degree to which the full diversity of a society is reflected by the legislature. While it is true that, under both PR and plurality systems, levels of consensus must be developed which are at least large enough to meet

the thresholds for bill passage (at least if that polity intends to avoid governmental paralysis), I would argue that a multi-party coalition is more desirable than a single "catch-all" party, even if that single party itself captures the same portion of the electorate represented by a PR coalition. As Hanna Pitkin puts it, quoting Carl Friedrich, "it may be argued that the 'fundamental principle' of PR is the attempt to 'secure a representative assembly reflecting with more or less mathematical exactness the various divisions in the electorate' " (Pitkin 1967, 61). While there is much more to be said in favor of PR and its majoritarian alternatives, for now, I simply assert that states with IU features such as PR are more idealistic than their majoritarian counterparts, given that the former more accurately depicts the likeness of the populace which they are to represent.[12]

Thus we are left with two ideal types to choose from. Both have highly consensual outcomes, a minimal potential for institutional mechanism effects, and IU. Have we any reason to believe that a consensus democracy characterized by a SOP, united government, and IU would be any more desirable than one *which lacked a SOP* but had IU features . . . or *vice versa*? To answer this question, we would ordinarily want to consider the nature of the policies being implemented by such regimes, and the utility of the SOP as a safeguard against tyranny. However, because we are attempting to assess the idealism of *a united government* under a SOP system, rather than a divided government, the SOP institutional mechanism is essentially neutralized and thus could not serve its intended purpose of stalling the advancement of governmental policies anyhow, whether such policies were for the public good or inherently tyrannical. Thus we can at least tentatively conclude that a consensus democracy characterized by a SOP, united government, IU, and highly consensual outcomes is just as idealistic as a consensus democracy characterized by IU, a unicameral, parliamentary system, and highly consensual outcomes. Ultimately, one would have to assess the nature of the policies being

---

[12] I do not intend to conduct a thorough review of the arguments for proportional and majoritarian visions of representation in this essay, so my conclusion that proportionality is more consistent with social idealism is likely to be seen as somewhat hasty and insufficiently justified. In G. Bingham Powell's synopsis of the main arguments for majoritarian and proportional systems of representation, he observes that, "Concentrated power is valued by majoritarians for enabling elected governments to carry out their promises (mandates) and for giving voters clear information about responsibility for government actions (accountability). Unless public opinion is very homogenous, however, concentrating power in the hands of the government will be detrimental to the normative principle of giving proportional influence to agents of all the electorate, which is the process most valued by the alternative (proportional) vision" (Powell 2000, 234). The vision of social conflict resolution which I discussed briefly in the introduction to this essay has two main components: inclusivity and agreement. Therefore, while mandates and accountability are important facets of democratic governance, I would assert that proportionality is more consistent with the goal of social conflict resolution, based primarily on its inclusive and empowering effects.

implemented by the supermajorities in order to assert with certitude that the actions of such regime types were conducive to the resolution of domestic social conflict, and this too would require thicker analysis, as well as a willingness to broach questions of political ethics.[13]

Can the Ideal Democratic Regimes Exist?
The Paradox of Political Diversity and Social Cohesion

Identifying the ideal types of consensus democracy which are most amenable to the greater good is one thing, but the practicality of, and extent to which such regimes can and do exist in reality is quite another. In fact, there has been much doubt as to whether PR systems, while perhaps fostering a more accurate reflection of the represented, are capable of adequately governing the polity. For instance, some have argued that proportional legislatures are inherently *antithetical* to the idea of consensus, precisely because such electoral structures allow nearly every faction to form their own party and to play a role in the state decision making processes. For example, Hanna Pitkin, discussing this common critique of PR in her text *The Concept of Representation* (1967), observes that, "The critics [of PR] charge that a proportional system atomizes opinion, multiplies political groupings, increases the violence of faction, prevents the formation of a stable majority, and hence prevents the legislature from governing" (64). A similar view is also expressed by F. A. Hermens in his book *Democracy or Anarchy?* (1972), for instance, when he states that, "Under P.R., however, no candidate and no party will, when the system is in full swing, be able to reach out for commanding influence over the nation as a whole. They know that it would be futile to ask for a majority; hence they confine themselves to their particular party, to its interests and its views. This implies a denial that there is anything common to all groups in the country" (83). Given such apprehensions about PR, one would find it counterintuitive to suggest that consensus democracies were in fact *more* consensual in their legislative vote outcomes. If anything, by these accounts, one would expect more gridlock and atomization among legislators in a consensus democracy with IU.

---

[13] This is not an unimportant consideration. In fact, one could argue that the nature of the laws being implemented are just as relevant to the approximation of a virtuous society as the level of inclusivity and the amount of agreement achieved in the implementation of those laws. Rehfeld makes a similar argument, for instance, asserting that, "I think any legitimate law will, as a condition of its legitimacy, need to reflect both a minimum of justice *and* correspond to the wills of those it governs" (Rehfeld 2009, 215n).

On the other hand, given that one of the institutional characteristics of consensus democracies *is* a more proportionately representative legislature, one might anticipate that legislatures with proportional systems of representation would be more consensual in their legislative roll-call vote outcomes, almost *by definition*. However, consensus democracy is thought of as an institutional design which can only set the stage for power-sharing between different groups in heterogeneous societies. The presence of an institutional design which offers greater *potential* for power-sharing doesn't necessarily mean that these countries will actually be able *to build* higher levels of inter and intra-party consensus once the previously excluded are brought into the democratic system. In fact, one might logically anticipate that PR would be just as, if not more likely to foster gridlock than majoritarian systems of representation. Thus the paradoxical question: why would a proportional legislature which was *less* united (as indicated by the more numerous political parties represented, *ceteris paribus*) be able to acquire *higher* levels of consensus in their legislative roll-call votes than a majoritarian legislature which usually only includes two or maybe three parties?

Before we can answer *why* this would be the case, we need to conduct an empirical investigation into whether or not *it is* the case that consensus democracies are in fact more consensual. In the following parts of this essay, I will do just that, by taking a look at whether or not there is a correlation between consensus or majoritarian democracies and consensus levels generated in legislative vote outcomes over time. I begin with a discussion of my variables and data sources, and then move on to a discussion of my quantitative analysis results. Following that, I will place the countries included in my empirical analysis into the conceptual typology discussed above, which will allow us to further assess prospects for the achievement of the ideal democratic regime, and will also bring to our attention potential cases for more specific analyses.

Roll-Call Votes and Institutional Characteristics:

Data Sources and the Development of the Variables

To measure consensus levels, I look at legislative roll-call vote data which I acquired from John Carey's *Legislative Voting Project*. The countries for which data is supplied on Carey's website, and those which I include in my data set are Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Israel, Mexico, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Peru, Philippines, Poland, and Russia. On Carey's website, there are several countries for which there

is more than one data set provided. For example, the Legislative Vote Project provides two data sets for Chile, one from 1997-98, and one from 1998-2000. In such cases, I develop separate mean consensus levels for each data set, and generate separate observations for each time period. For each country, first, I generate the percentage of yeas on each vote, after which I find the mean average of those yes vote percentages, for all roll-call votes included in the data set.[14]

I use only those data sets which provided the threshold for bill passage on each vote, and so I was able to control for this crucial variable by only including bills requiring a simple majority of yes votes. As was discussed previously, it is important to control for the bill-passage threshold not only because it controls an institutional mechanism which would otherwise be hard to rule out as an alternative explanation of consensus levels, but also because it reveals cases in which the levels of consensus which are well above the threshold can more plausibly be explained by irenic cultural norms, which is essential if we are concerned with identifying democratic regimes which more closely approximate the goal of domestic social conflict resolution.[15]

My institutional design variables were gathered from two sources: John Carey and Simon Hix's *Electoral System Design Project*, and the *Institutions And Elections Project* (IAEP) at Binghamton University led by Patrick Regan and David Clark. Most of the institutional design variables are gathered from the IAEP because it provides data on a year by year basis, allowing for a more accurate alignment of the years of the institutional characteristics with those of the legislative roll-call votes provided by Carey's Legislative Vote Project. Carey and Hix's Electoral System Design Project provides useful institutional information, such as the effective representation threshold for each country, but the data is provided in intervals of every three or

---

[14] Using a single mean consensus level to represent a country within which, during that same period, hundreds of different types of votes on various types of issues were carried out, numerous committee hearings took place, behind the scenes negotiations and deal-making efforts were engaged in, and various other activities related to the policy making process were carried out, is admittedly an oversimplification. This coarse level of analysis is largely due to the dearth of available roll-call vote data and the lack of relevant information in those data sets that were available. For instance, since most of the individual data sets do not indicate the date of the vote, or the type of issue being voted on, I was unable to sort the data based on this information.

[15] Douglas Rae, in his 1975 article "The Limits of Consensual Decision", argues that free unanimous consent in policy making is not possible because in every policy decision made under unanimity rule, preservation of the status-quo requires only a single veto, while the implementation of a new policy requires unanimity. However, Rae focuses on situations where there is *a rule* of unanimity rather than situations where individuals might arrive at unanimity without such a rule in place, such as in the case of legislative roll-call votes where the threshold for bill passage is only a simple majority. Rae's is the sort of argument which I am attempting to circumvent by controlling the bill-passage threshold.

four years, for instance, rather than on a year by year basis like the IAEP. Still, I use the Carey and Hix institutional data for the variables which the IAEP does not provide, and align the years of the institutional data with those of roll call votes as closely as possible.

In addition to the individual institutional design variables, I also generate three index variables: one for each of the two dimensions of Consensus/Majoritarian democracy, and a third which pools together all of the specific institutional variables to generate a number representing how consensual or majoritarian a given regime's institutional design is overall. To generate my index variables, I first create dummy variables for each of the institutional variables not already in this format, and then set them up to range from zero to one, with zero being perfectly majoritarian, and one being perfectly consensual. For the SOP and IU indices, I find the average score for each country on the four variables included in each dimension, and for the overall Consensus/Majoritarian Index I find the average of each country's scores on all eight institutional variables. Table 4.1 shows each county's scores on the IU dimension, Table 4.2 shows each county's scores on the SOP dimension, and Table 4.3 displays the overall Consensus/ Majoritarian Index score for each country, as well as their mean legislative roll-call vote consensus level for the time period of the specific data set.

(Tables 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3 about here)

A few additional points about my institutional variables are in order. Looking first at the IU dimension, for Electoral Rule, I gave a country a "1" if they had a PR system, a ".5" if they had a mixed system, and a "0", if they had a "winner-takes-all" system. In addition, I *added* .25 to this score if a country had a reserved seat for a particular minority group, and I *subtracted* .25 if a country had explicitly banned any parties from being represented.[16] I also included a variable which indicates the amount of parties represented in the legislature with greater than 5% of the legislative seats. Countries with *more* than two parties were considered more consensual than countries with *only* two parties. In addition, I also include a variable for the amount of parties in

---

[16] This is admittedly a somewhat arbitrary number to add or subtract from each country's electoral rule score, but without some objective means of measuring how majoritarian it is to ban a particular party in particular contexts, or of gauging how consensual it is to preserve a seat for a minority group, the subtraction and addition of .25 seems sufficient. For future work, a more careful scoring procedure would require a closer look, for instance, at the popularity of the party being excluded or included, which would allow one to more shrewdly assess how great of an impact the inclusion or exclusion of those particular political parties has on the consensuality of the electoral system.

the executive administration, or "Government," with more parties being indicative of a more consensual, power-sharing institution. Finally, I include the "effective representation threshold" which is the minimum percentage of the popular vote that a political party needs to acquire in order to gain access to the legislative body. This threshold indicates the level of legislative proportionality in a given state, and supplements the coarser categorical "electoral rule" variable. To illustrate the meaning of the effective representation threshold: If a country's effective threshold was 5%, then a political party would need to acquire a minimum of 5% of the popular vote in order to be represented in the legislature, and they would usually be given ≈5% of the seats in that legislature. If a country had an explicitly codified *legal* representation threshold, I used that instead of the effective threshold.

Turning to the SOP dimension variables, I gave a country a score of "1" on the presidential system variable if they had presidential systems in which the president was elected by the people in a separate election, and "0" otherwise. Another variable I include within the SOP dimension is Executive & Legislative Veto power. For that variable, a country was given a "1" if both the executive *and* the legislative branches had concurrent veto power over policy proposals, and a "0" otherwise. For my Federal System variable, I give a country a "1" if they had a federal arrangement between the central government and the more local regions *and* if the more local regions had the ability to elect their own representatives. For the Bicameral System variable, I gave countries a "1" if they had a bicameral system *and* representatives in both chambers were publicly elected, and a "0" otherwise.

Quantitative Analysis Results

The results of my OLS linear regressions are mixed. I find a stronger correlation between legislative vote consensus levels and some of the SOP characteristics than I do with IU characteristics. There appears to be a fairly strong correlation between presidential systems of government and mean consensus levels. In addition, systems in which both the executive and the legislative branches have veto power over policy are positively correlated with mean legislative roll-call vote consensus levels. However, federal systems of government are *negatively* correlated with average consensus levels, suggesting that, in this way, consensus democracies are *not* more consensual. In addition, I find no evidence of a correlation between bicameral

systems of government and consensus levels, and my SOP index variable does not appear to be significantly correlated with consensus levels either.

Turning to the IU dimension, I find a statistically significant negative correlation between the effective threshold and the average legislative roll-call vote consensus level, consistent with the suggestion that more proportional systems of representation will tend to be more consensual in their vote outcomes. This finding is significant, in that it goes against the argument that proportionality reduces government cohesion and efficiency. However, none of my other three institutional unity variables are significantly correlated with mean consensus level, nor is my IU index variable, although the coefficient is positive (suggesting that consensus democracies are more consensual) and *nearly* significant, with a p-value of .127. In addition, my Consensus/ Majoritarian Index variable, which pools together all eight individual variables, is not significantly correlated with mean legislative roll-call vote consensus levels, although this too is positive and nearly significant, with a p-value of .136.

Another way to assess the correlation between consensual institutions and consensus levels generated in vote outcomes is by placing the countries included in my data set back into the classification of Consensual Regime types which I discussed earlier in this essay. In that typology, I bisected the SOP dimension into unified and divided government types, and further split divided government into two types: one in which opposing legislative majorities each controlled a separate legislative chamber, and another where the same party controlled both chambers of the legislature but the executive position was held by an opposition party representative. Ideally, I would be able to place the countries which I've included in my data set into this typological framework. However, because neither the *Electoral System Design Project* nor the *Institutions And Elections Project* include information pertaining to whether governments were united or divided for a particular year, and for the sake of shortening my analysis, I simplify my typology in order to classify the countries I've examined. I alter my typology by creating a 3 X 3 matrix with strong, medium, and low categories for both the SOP and IU dimensions of consensus and majoritarian democracies. To determine where a country would be placed, I refer to their scores on the IU and SOP indices. In Table 6, using this 3 X 3 matrix, I classify each

country based on its SOP and IU characteristics. Countries in bold type are those with highly consensual outcomes (i.e., average levels of consensus greater than .55).[17]

(Insert Table 6 about here)

As we can see, none of the states with high consensus levels had low scores on the IU dimension, and in fact, most of them were strong on both the IU and SOP dimensions. This reaffirms the evidence provided by the OLS linear regression that multi-party governance does not necessarily undermine the ability of legislatures to remain cohesive, and in fact, seems to suggest that IU may actually *enhance* social cohesion and legislative efficiency. In addition, it would also appear that the SOP aspect of consensus democracies is correlated with legislative consensus levels, corroborating some of the OLS results. This empirical study provides preliminary evidence that consensus democracies are, in fact, more consensual than their majoritarian counterparts, at least when it comes to legislative roll-call votes.

Discussion

In the first half of this study, I identified the appropriate ideal types of democratic regimes for more closely approximating the ideal end of social conflict resolution. I have argued that the appropriate regime type is one which fosters both inclusivity and agreement, i.e., a consensus democracy characterized by IU and sustained consensual policy outcomes. By unpacking the SOP dimension a bit, I was able to establish a fairly elaborate, though not logically exhaustive, classification of consensual regime types, from which I was able to winnow out two specific permutations where it would be most plausible that a fuller realization of peace and democracy had been approximated in the domestic sphere. However, it remained to be seen whether there were extant regimes which fit into these two classifications.

In the later half of this paper, I attempted to assess whether or not there is some correlation between consensus or majoritarian democracies and levels of legislative roll-call vote consensus levels. My initial empirical investigation indicates that the paradoxical confluence of

---

[17] While this may not appear as a particularly high level of consensus to sustain, it was the minimum level of sustained agreement that I would consider to be comfortable above the simple majority threshold for bill-passage. Looking again at Table 4.3, we find that Brazil was the closest country to this .55 level, while the other countries deemed to have high average consensus levels were more comfortably above this level of agreement.

legislative diversity and ideological cohesion are more common than the critics of PR would have us believe. While my initial results largely point towards a positive correlation between consensus democracy and consensual outcomes, further work is needed, first to provide added assurance that there is such a correlation, and, from there, we can try *to explain* this correlation. One way we can do this, for instance, is by honing in on specific institutional features of consensus democracy, to try to pin down more specific causal mechanisms. A thicker investigation of individual countries could also help us to determine whether irenic culture was a plausible causal factor for explaining consensus in consensus democracies. In a sense, a failure to identify specific institutional mechanisms, would further lend to the idea that culture was in fact behind the paradoxical confluence of legislative inclusivity and ideological agreement, but gathering positive evidence suggesting that irenic cultural norms were in fact behind the achievement of consensus in consensus democracy may be difficult.

A third potential path for additional work in this area would simply be to establish more legislative roll-call vote data sets. For example, New Zealand would be an ideal case to study given that they adopted a more proportional system of representation in the mid-1990s. The roll-call vote data from New Zealand that is available, and that which I use in this study, includes votes leading up to their electoral reform, but there is no roll-call vote data available from the period after reform, which would allow for an analysis of the changes in consensus levels within that state following the electoral changes of the mid-1990s. Assessing the effects of institutional variation *within* states over time is probably a more effective way to assess the impact of institutional structures on legislative consensus levels, than by comparing average consensus levels across states, as I have done here. However, given the often static nature of electoral and representative institutions, and the paucity of roll-call vote data, this remain a difficult approach to pursue.

In Conclusion

This study is a first step in a nascent research project, which is aimed towards determining how consensual consensus democracies truly are, and what the advantages of such institutional arrangements are for those interested in fostering irenic cultural norms and a closer approximation to domestic social conflict resolution. My initial results should help to assuage some of the apprehensions of those reluctant to support PR because they think it has a

balkanizing effect on fissiparous electorates. My findings points to eight cases warranting further investigation: Brazil, the Czech Republic, Mexico, Peru, the Philippines, Russia, Chile, and Israel. All of these countries, at least during the period for which the roll-call vote data was provided, exhibited the characteristics of the idealistic types of consensus democracy which I teased out of my classification of consensual regimes earlier in this essay. An important question should be: to what extent can irenic cultural norms explain the existence of these idealistic regimes. Another important question is whether these irenic cultural norms, if they did in fact exist, led to the adoption of the consensual institutions, or if the consensual institutional designs were in place *prior to* the diffusion of power-sharing proclivities and therefore might be seen as a a catalyst for peaceful, democratic norms. Further studies can shed light on possible answers to such questions, and can also help us to understand, more generally, whether there is reason to believe that states can more closely approximate the realization of domestic conflict resolution.

Works Cited

Cox, Gary & Mathew McCubbins. *Setting the Agenda: Responsible Party Government in the U.S. House of Representatives* (2005). Cambridge University Press.

Hermens, F.A.. *Democracy or Anarchy? A Study of Proportional Representation* (1972). New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation.

Lijphart, Arend. "Constitutional Choices for New Democracies" (1996). Published in *The Global Resurgence of Democracy* (2nd Edition). Larry Diamond and Marc Plattner (eds.). Johns Hopkins Univ. Press.

Lijphart, Arend. *Patterns of Democracy* (1999). New Haven: Yale University Press.

Lipset, Seymore M. "The Centrality of Political Culture" (1996). Published in *The Global Resurgence of Democracy* (2nd Edition). Larry Diamond and Marc Plattner (eds.). Johns Hopkins Univ. Press.

Mayhew, David. *Congress: The Electoral Connection* (1974). New Haven: Yale University Press.

Pitkin, Hanna. *The Concept of Representation* (1967). University of California Press.

Powell, G. Bingham. *Elections as Instruments of Democracy: Majoritarian and Proportional Visions* (2000). New Haven: Yale University Press.

Quade, Quentin L. "PR and Democratic Statecraft" (1996). Published in *The Global Resurgence of Democracy* (2nd Edition). Larry Diamond and Marc Plattner (eds.). Johns Hopkins Univ. Press.

Rae, Douglas. "The Limits of Consensual Decision" (1975). *The American Political Science Review*. Vol. 69, No. 4. pp. 1270-1294.

Refeld, Andrew. "Representation Rethought: On Trustees, Delegates, and Gyroscopes in the Study of Political Representation and Democracy" (2009). *American Political Science Review*. Vol. 103, No. 2. pp. 214-230.

Data Sources

Carey, John M. "Legislative Voting Project" (2007). *Carey data archive.* www.dartmouth.edu/~jcarey

Carey, John M. & Simon Hix. "Electoral System Design Project" (2008). *Carey data archive.* www.dartmouth.edu/~jcarey

Regan, Patrick & David Clark. "Institutions And Elections Project" (2009). Binghamton University, Department of Political Science. http://www2.binghamton.edu/political-science/institutions-and-elections-project.html