



QUEEN'S  
UNIVERSITY  
BELFAST

# Queen's Policy Engagement

A series of Policy Briefing Papers from  
Queen's University Belfast

Policy  
Paper

5

## Building Better Institutions to Include 'Others' in Power-sharing Agreements

June 2019

Dr Timofey Agarin, Dr Allison McCulloch, Dr Aleksandra Zdeb & Dr Drew Mikhael  
School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics

### Introduction

Since the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, consociational power-sharing has been one of the most prominent institutional prescriptions to stop violent conflicts and move divided societies to peace. The key principles of power-sharing - veto powers, protection of cultural rights, proportional sharing of executive offices and public institutions - have been foundational governance principles in divided societies such as North Macedonia, Burundi, Fiji, South Africa, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

As a result of the prominence of power-sharing cases, scholars studying consociations have focused on how institutions can more effectively end hostilities and make the transition from conflict to peace easier. To end violence, central antagonists of the conflict who

represent the key political and social divides negotiate power-sharing settlements that formally write into constitutions and legal statutes positions that are salient to the included groups.

While cases of power-sharing have shown to be successful in stopping violence, there is growing evidence that in the decades after peace agreements are signed, political representation is often inaccessible for those non-antagonistic communities, leaving their voices unheard and concerns neglected.

Institutions in power-sharing have been shown to create formal and informal incentives to maintain the political status quo to ensure stability, which leaves 'Others' on the margin of political decision making.

***Power-sharing agreements are created to ensure political representations which reflect demographic proportionality among the major conflicting groups in a divided society.***

These 'Others' (as defined by the designation in Northern Ireland's Assembly) includes groups with different experiences of marginalisation and different political objectives. Drawing on both practice and scholarship, we identify three broad categories of 'Others':

- **Ethnic Others** includes those whose primary political identity is ethnic but who are not included in the government structure, often because the group constitutes a very small share of the population and/or they are territorially dispersed.
- **Ethnic-rejecting Others** includes those who seek political participation on a socially relevant identity other than ethnicity, and for whom that identity has been the basis for their exclusion and marginalisation from political life. This may often be centred on gender and sexuality, but could also include religion, language, or other core identity features not accounted for in the consociational structure.
- **Issue-oriented Others** includes those rejecting all identity-driven labels and who instead pursue ideologically-underpinned forms of political participation, either in the form of traditional left-right politics or through post-materialist mobilisation, such as environmental activism. They make the conscious choice to disconnect their social and ethnic identities from their political identities and often seek political access in keeping with liberal, individualist notions of representative democracy.

## Power-sharing Institutions: Inflexible and Ingrained?

1. *Within power-sharing systems where a place in the government is guaranteed, those who have been included in the system have little to no incentive to reform mechanisms of representation.*

Power-sharing agreements are created to ensure political representations which reflect demographic proportionality among the major conflicting groups in a divided society. When societal make-up changes or new politically relevant identities emerge, a necessary review of representation might be desirable; when non-conflict-based identities emerge creating new electorates, this might be required to further sustain peace.

However, updating mechanisms of representation falls to elected representatives of formerly conflicting groups;

reviewing current institutions may undermine their support in constituent bases, losing their assured positions in power – this has made power-sharing systems extremely hard to reform.

2. *Mechanisms designed to protect community identities (such as the petition of concern in Northern Ireland and other forms of veto rights) can hinder legislative amendments in the name of community protection.*

Veto powers on policies touching upon groups' identities to protect their vital interests are a crucial part of power-sharing systems; these often help put the conflicting communities at ease with one another when interacting in public office.

However, as seen in Northern Ireland, they are sometimes utilised in order to halt the progress of legislation that seeks to move beyond the legacy of the conflict and which may serve to revise the existing mechanisms of representation. Opportunities to reform vetoes are limited in divided societies as included elites do not wish to water down the mechanisms protecting their vital interests.

3. *Institutional inclusions for those who do not identify with the dominant conflict narrative (such as the 'Other' community designation in Northern Ireland) often fall short of their intended aim, resulting in tokenistic inclusion.*

Mechanisms that recognise that not all voters will adhere to the conflict narrative are an important first step in expanding opportunities for inclusion. However, such mechanisms often lump disparate groups with disparate aims under a single heading of 'Other'.

This has both symbolic and substantive implications. Symbolically, it risks treating those who fall into this catch-all category as marginal or residual.

Substantively, it risks treating 'Others' as less important for governance decisions, particularly if cross-community voting rules do not facilitate the inclusion of 'Others'.

## The Policy Primacy of Divided Communities

4. *Divisions resulting from past conflict are still highly salient in contemporary politics, making it difficult to address issues that are not framed as dominant group concerns.*

While fighting may have stopped and the introduction of power-sharing results in elite cooperation on some issues, the divisions that created the conflict do not disappear overnight. When combined with legacy issues (e.g., the disappeared, justice for or reparations to victims of violence), intergroup division in postconflict societies is continuously present, making it especially difficult to discuss issues without falling into us-them narrative. Concerns of those who do not identify with the conflict communities find their concerns secondary unless they can be aligned with one of the main groups.

5. *Divided communities party to the conflict distrust those who fail to 'defend' their major concerns; there is little chance for the new groups to make their voice heard too.*

Newcomers are often distrusted in post-conflict societies and by preferring not to align with either of formerly conflicting parties, they are oftentimes at risk of being co-opted by the one side or the other. This constrains newcomers' inclusion as they are viewed by the established elites as having the potential to imbalance the demographics and potentially claim a seat at the political table. This puts the extension of group rights to autonomy in areas such as culture, education and social issues at odds with a civic agenda, as debates over integrated schooling in Northern Ireland suggest. Further, a presumption of cultural autonomy for ethnic groups can draw issues of individual equality into the discursive nexus of ethnic politics, as witnessed in the case of marriage equality.

## Moving Forward

Power-sharing provides powerful institutional mechanisms that contribute to peace in divided societies. In Northern Ireland, the Good Friday Agreement has ended violent conflict but it entailed a significant trade-off: The successful management of the conflict between main communities lead to the marginalisation of 'Others', those who do not identify with either of the two dominant political views.

However, political elites across the political spectrum believe it is the challenge to be addressed by engaging closer with the 'Others' and drawing them into the political process. 'Others' too, recognise that organising on issues outside of the group lines that defined past conflict are often playing catch-up, with little space for new agendas unless these are presented in terms relevant

to the already included. Further, they acknowledge the still salient divisions and elite unwillingness to commit to reform that may undermine their control over key public administrations.

Our central finding highlights avenues for representation and participation of these groups in divided societies, drawing on the close examination of cooperation of power-sharing elites with the civil society sector within the scope encouraged by consociational institutions.

By assessing how the 'Others' navigate power-sharing systems, institutions and political elites' preferences, we have been able to sketch pathways for mutually-benefitting strategies of elected and social elites in our case studies.

Two key questions that should frame any discussion around the inclusivity of consociationalism are:

1. How should power-sharing arrangements engage with these groups?
2. How can issues of mutual concern be addressed in a political process?

Our project concludes that contrary to the usual expectations, changes are permitted and desired from within the system, but such changes come about incrementally and actors facilitating the changes are mindful of **three** central factors for success:

- Campaigns for change must have cross-community support, including as wide a variety of stakeholders as possible. Ideally, the organisation of campaigns should be at grassroots to include and create a bridging between divided communities, underlining the wider societal benefit on issues unrelated to identities of conflicting groups.
- Institutions and laws that provide the biggest barriers to inclusion require public signalling via campaigns to include elites of all groups, highlighting the benefits for all dominant groups.
- Objectives need to be politically and logistically achievable, ideally within the period of one legislation, to make a sustainable and visible difference to the historically rooted divisions that often play on existential fears of communities. However, uprooting fears in divided societies is a long-term commitment and requires more than one electoral circle and campaign.

Dr Timofey Agarin and Dr Allison McCulloch are the Coordinators for the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) research project 'Exclusion Amid Inclusion.'

**Contact:**

*Dr Timofey Agarin*

*Dr Allison McCulloch*

*Email: [t.agarin@qub.ac.uk](mailto:t.agarin@qub.ac.uk)*

*Email: [McCullochA@brandonu.ca](mailto:McCullochA@brandonu.ca)*

**References:**

*Agarin, Timofey; Allison McCulloch and Cera Murtagh. "Others in Deeply Divided Societies: A Research Agenda." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 24.3 (2018): 299-310.*

*Byrne, Siobhan and Allison McCulloch. "Gender, representation and power-sharing in post-conflict institutions." *International Peacekeeping* 19.5 (2012): 565-580.*

*Byrne, Siobhan and Allison McCulloch. "Is Power-Sharing Bad for Women?" *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 24, no 1 (2018): 1-12.*

*Larin, Stephen and Marc Röggla. "Time to Invite the 'Others' to the Table: A Proposal to Make South Tyrol More Inclusive," *Democracy Audit UK* (2016).*

*Nagle, John. "Beyond Ethnic Entrenchment and Amelioration: An Analysis of Non-Sectarian Social Movements and Lebanon's Consociationalism," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (2017): 1-20.*

*Stojanović, Nenad. "Political Marginalization of Others in Consociational Regimes," *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft* (2018): 1-24. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12286-017-0375-4>.*



**QUEEN'S  
UNIVERSITY  
BELFAST**



Queen's University Belfast  
University Road  
Belfast  
BT7 1NN  
Northern Ireland  
United Kingdom

Queen's Policy Engagement  
w: <http://qppl.qub.ac.uk>  
e: [qppl@qub.ac.uk](mailto:qppl@qub.ac.uk)

 @QPolAtQueens