

**A NON-COMPETITIVE PATTERN OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN LIBERAL  
DEMOCRACIES THE CASE OF SWITZERLAND, AUSTRIA AND LEBANON**

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## **A non competitive pattern of conflict management in liberal democracies : the case of Switzerland., Austria and Lebanon<sup>1</sup>**

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In current political typologies the existence of a fundamental and “normal” pattern of conflict settlement in liberal democracies is often taken for granted, namely, deciding controversial political issues by alternating parliamentary majorities which result from the competition of political parties in periodic elections (cf., for example, Schumpeter’s still influential “theory of competitive leadership” in democracy). Such typologies often take the form of simple dichotomies, such as democracy versus dictatorship, or they are variants consisting of three members (e.g., totalitarian versus authoritarian versus democratic government). Recently, “developmental” typologies have gained increasing favour in the field of comparative politics. In these the competitive leadership model (often identified with Anglo-Saxon or, more precisely, the British two-party system) appears to be the final point of an ascending continuum of political development, whereas the multi-party coalition systems of continental Europe are viewed as an intermediate stage on this continuum and hence as a somehow imperfect type of liberal democracy. In this line of thinking we may include the well known proposals for a transformation of those “imperfect” democracies into really competitive systems by constitutional or legal devices, for example by a change of the electoral system, or of the rules for selecting the head of government (as has been suggested in France by the advocates of a genuine presidential system).

The validity of such arguments has repeatedly been questioned. It has for example been argued recently that “it might be reasonable to consider multiparty systems as the natural way for government and oppositions to manage their conflicts in democracies, while the two-party systems ... are the deviant cases”.<sup>2</sup> Though we doubt that it makes sense to consider any particular type of political system as a “natural” one, or inversely as a “deviant case”, we think that the rather unique character of competitive two-party *systems* is well emphasized here. Comparative political science thus seems to be on the point of arriving at more appropriate schemes of classification which are free of hidden teleological implications.

This paper intends to contribute to such efforts by analyzing a type of political systems which has hitherto been rather neglected in comparative research: we speak of systems in which political groups like to settle their conflicts by negotiated agreements

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<sup>1</sup> This paper resumes and develops further some hypotheses contained in the author’s *Proporzdemokratie: politisches System und politische Kultur in der Schweiz und in Österreich* (J.C.B.Mohr, ‘Tübingen, 1967)

<sup>2</sup> Robert A. Dahl., *Political opposition in Western democracies*, 1966, 3-5.

among all the relevant actors, the majority principle being applicable in fairly limited domains only. The most important cases are Switzerland (the Confederation as well as the cantons), Austria (the central government from 1945 to 1966, the *Länder* since 1918) and Lebanon. The most salient feature of their political system is the distribution of public office among all important linguistic groups and regions (Switzerland), political parties (Austria, Switzerland), or, as in Lebanon (and in the Swiss Confederation until 1798), religious denominations. Another example is the Holy Roman Empire from 1648 to 1806, in which conflicts among the religious groups had to be settled by *amicabilis compositio*, and the majority principle was explicitly suspended for such matters; this principle was further guaranteed by the constitutional rule of “parity” of Protestants and Catholics in the distribution of offices.

It is tempting to explain this pattern with the peculiar social structure of the countries we are investigating. The political cleavages run along linguistic and/or denominational lines. The strong ideological tensions between the conservative and the socialist “camp” in Austria retain the imprint of quasi-religious antagonisms dating back till the counter-reformation. The numerical relations of rival groups therefore are rather inflexible. This means that in a society thus divided along religious or ethnic boundaries a political strategy of maximization of votes - an essential feature of competitive political systems - cannot work. Hence, if neither group has a clear numerical preponderance, negotiated agreement appears to be the only possible issue by which civil peace can be preserved.

Such agreements are to be distinguished from those reached by bargaining in a “homogeneous” political culture. If actors agree on political ends and means their preferences tend to be generally compatible and transitive. Thus, if they differ on transitive preferences, they may agree on a compromise which constitutes an intermediate point on a common preference scale. This is usually done by incremental concessions of the bargaining actors, and often it is assumed that the intermediate solution is a “just”, “natural” or “rational” one.

Instead, in a society divided by religious or strong ideological differences, or among linguistic groups, some (or the more important) preferences of the actors are incompatible and intransitive. Hence, there exists no common preference scale on which an intermediate solution may be found. In this case the following expedients may be used: either (1) the political system is divided into (more or less) autonomous spheres of influence in which the actors may be free to realize the preferences held by the respective groups; such spheres of influence may be on a regional basis (this is the Swiss solution of linguistic conflicts) or on a functional basis (this has resulted in Austria from the allocation of ministries among the political parties). Or (2) the actors may agree on large-scale barter similar to package deals as

they occur not infrequently in international negotiations; this procedure means that one of the actors offers a concession he detests in exchange of a concession by his opponent that the latter detests equally strongly. This formula, known in Austria under the name of *Junktim*, amounts to a partial realization of the actors incompatible and intransitive preferences in different domains; its significant mark is that often there exists no objective relation among the “junctimized” (*junktimiert*) matters, and that the solution can be labeled neither “intermediate” nor “just” nor “natural”. Of course, in all these countries there are issues which are characterized by compatibility and transitivity of preferences, for example in economic and social matters; but even these are often included in such exchange procedures.

That the social structure of the countries concerned is an essential condition of this pattern of conflict management, is quite obvious. But it offers no sufficient explanation. For it is equally obvious that there exist important countries with an equally “fragmented” political culture where conflicts are managed in a rather different fashion. The case of France, beginning with Jean Bodin’s advocacy of authoritarian arbitration of religious conflicts by the sovereign power, may be an example in point. Furthermore, social structure alone cannot explain the practice of proportional distribution of office and of non-competitive agreements among political parties in Switzerland, for example, for - at the difference of linguistic and religious groups - these are much less divided by incompatible and intransitive preferences.

From this we conclude that one must look for intervening variables which explain why a system of *amicabilis compositio* and *Proporz* correlates in some countries with a social structure in which the preferences of rival groups appear to be largely incompatible. One of these variables is the inter-action of the conflicts within the political system and the conflicts in the surrounding international system, particularly if the same cleavages divide the one as well as the other. This is true of Lebanon and was true of Switzerland too, as long as religious or ethnic antagonisms played a major role in European politics. The groups within the state then have to be balanced in order to maintain the integrity of the political system against pressures from outside, while on the other hand the inner equilibrium might be a condition of the equilibrium of the surrounding international system.

But the intervening variable most relevant to our topic seems to belong to the domain of “political culture”: this is the fact that peculiar norms of conflict management develop under specific historical circumstances. Thus the most important historical roots of the Swiss system of proportional representation of all large groups in government seem to be (1) the principle of “parity” of Catholics and Protestants within the Confederation which, in analogy to the Holy German Empire, developed during the 16th to 18th centuries; and (2) the tradition of municipal government where all patrician or otherwise privileged families used to be represented in the councils of towns and cantons. Later the same formulae were applied to

the settlement of ethnic, and finally of inter-party conflicts. The Lebanese system goes back to the Ottoman tradition of autonomy of the religious communities (millets) and to the cooperation of Christian and Druse millets in the Turkish province of Lebanon since the treaties of 1861 and 1864 which established Lebanese autonomy and provided for a multi-denominational council of notables to assist the governor.

As for Austria, political parties continue to manage their conflicts according to those rules of the parliamentary game which (as for example the *Junktim*) were used in the Habsburg Empire to establish the fragile *modus vivendi* of the different nations of the monarchy, and the political usages of the republic still bear the impact of the politics of *Ausgleich*, that is, the settlement of ethnic antagonisms by institutional devices such as patronage, committees representing the different groups, demarcation of autonomous spheres of influence, and so on. Another factor of importance is the strong influence which corporate representation of interests exerts upon policy-making; this contributes to the strong inclination of Austrian political leaders and legislators to manage their conflicts by negotiated agreements (in the manner of union-employer bargains) rather than by political competition and by the majority principle, which in the eyes of the minority often appears to be “undemocratic”.

The common essence of these developments is this: Under certain (and quite different) historical circumstances “fragmented” political cultures generate methods of conflict management which permit the survival and continued existence of the political system and at the same time a considerable measure of group autonomy. These methods consist in transactions which differ markedly from bargains in a “homogeneous” political culture and have much in common with agreements as they take place among nations. Then they become norms which are retransmitted by the learning processes in the political socialization of elites and thus acquire a strong degree of persistence through time. The case of Switzerland demonstrates that this pattern of conflict management may become so firmly established that it will remain essentially the issues change. Recent developments in that country as well as in Austria seem to indicate an increasing tendency to settle social and economic affairs by agreements - often rather highly formalized - among the large interest groups; this can be interpreted as an extension of the pattern to these domains too.

If our hypothesis is correct this would mean that continued existence of fundamental cleavages is not an absolute condition of the persistence of this pattern. It may come to a point where polarization of the electorate is decreasing, as seems to be the case in present-day Austria. But if the elites are strongly integrated in parties of rigid discipline, as in Austria, their perception of political conflicts may differ markedly from the manner in which these are perceived by a majority of voters. Policy disagreements which voters regard as

being of rather limited importance may then be interpreted by elites in terms of fundamental cleavages, and, in critical situations the polarization of voters may even be reactivated by the elites. On the other hand, if elites cease to perceive the society as divided by fundamentals, they may nonetheless continue to uphold the supposed virtues of the “typical Austrian compromise” or “typical Swiss compromise” (a characteristic phrase quite current in both countries) and to prefer this pattern of cartelized decision-making to political competition of the “Anglo-Saxon” type. This hypothesis is supported by empirical evidence indicating that voters in different countries differ much less in their perception of political conflicts than do the political elites. An important example is the demonstration by Converse and Dupeux that the polarization of French public opinion, as compared with the less strong polarization in the United States, seems to be largely an elite phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> This aspect is often somewhat neglected in the discussion on political culture and, in voting research.

The discussion on *Proporz* government has concentrated on the efficiency of the system. Unfortunately the problem of efficiency has been disregarded in comparative research on political systems. One reason of this may be the difficulty to find an operational definition of such efficiency. We might define it as the capacity of a political system to resolve, within a reasonable space of time, the problems considered as vital or important by substantial segments of public opinion, including those problems that can be expected to gain such importance in a foreseeable future. But then we would be led to the conclusion that no political system at all is efficient, for it seems to be a structural fact of modern industrial society that the political system always lags behind the expectations placed in it by some important groups. It seems highly improbable that any material definition of goals would enable us to measure and to compare the efficiency of political systems.

Instead we may inquire into the degree to which certain essential functions are performed in a given system, considering them at first under the aspect of the mechanisms of conflict management, and thereafter under the aspect of performance of vital tasks by the political system. As to the first aspect, comparison of the Swiss and the Austrian system is particularly instructive, for the mechanisms of conflict management work obviously much more smoothly in the Swiss system than they did in the Austrian coalition. Austrian political parties are strongly integrated social communities (“pillarized”, in the sense of the Dutch *verzuiling*), and the bipolar structure of the coalition reinforced their antagonisms; moreover the coalition worked within the framework of rather centralized political and administrative system. Although horizontal communication channels (for example, on the union-employer level) facilitated the solution of many problems and thus relieved the load on the system,

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<sup>3</sup> Philip E. Converse./Georges Dupeux: Politicization of the electorate in France and the United States. In: *Public Opinion Quarterly* 26 (1962), 1-23

important agreements often had to be worked out at the top by the leaders of the coalition parties. Such a system may of course quickly be deadlocked, whereas in Switzerland several factors contribute to render the mechanisms much more flexible: there are more than two cooperating parties (Radicals, Catholics, Socialists, conservative “Peasants and Bourgeois”) which are rather loosely integrated and little disciplined; their mutual relationships are characterized by multiple intersections of cleavages (regional, linguistic, confessional, economic and social); and they work within the framework of a strongly decentralized federal system. This means that in Switzerland, unlike Austria, it remains possible to avoid deadlock by majority decisions. For majorities in the Swiss system are of a rather temporary and inconsistent character and do not infringe - as would do the consistent majorities of the Austrian two-party antagonism - upon the fundamental principle of transactional conflict management and cooperation of all relevant groups. *Proporz* systems, like federal states, can thus be said to work better if there exist several independent centers of political power, because these can use the majority principle not as the fundamental device of conflict management and as the ultimate source of legitimacy but as an auxiliary expedient to avoid deadlock, whereas in a system consisting of only two parties the majority principle is quite inapplicable.

It is rather frequently assumed that *Proporz* systems perform less well the vital tasks of the commonwealth than do competitive or bureaucratic systems, especially because important constitutional functions are neutralized and paralyzed by the cartelization of groups and political parties. This criticism often overlooks the fact that, by a process of functional substitution, these tasks may be performed by other elements of the system than those to which the constitutional texts assign the respective tasks. Control has been exercised, as the late Otto Kirchheimer has underlined, by the bias of mutual *Bereichsopposition*, or of opposition restricted to certain domains, of the coalition partners.<sup>4</sup> The same may be said of innovation, although the Austrian or the Swiss system certainly include specific factors that may block innovative change as effectively as does, for example, the structure of British trade unionism. Admittedly, Lebanon offers numerous examples of impediments to social change and innovation which arise if an elaborate equilibrium of groups has to be preserved; but there is no reason to believe that the political systems of the Arab neighbour states are more efficient. Perhaps central coordination may be particularly difficult in a *Proporz* system, but competitive and bureaucratic systems have their specific problems in this regard. The present rather unsatisfactory state of comparative research does not permit to make a definitive

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<sup>4</sup> Otto Kirchheimer: The waning of opposition in parliamentary regimes. In: *Social Research* 24 (1957), 127-156.

judgment; but it appears to be difficult to credit competitive systems with a generally higher level of efficiency as compared with *Proporz* systems. We can only specify which are the characteristic deficiencies and strong points of either system.

In one domain, it is true, *Proporz* systems seem to be less capable of effective performance of tasks, namely that of foreign policy. Switzerland, Austria and Lebanon show that the preservation of the inner equilibrium presupposes a reduction of external demands to the political system. This may explain that, in a general fashion, *Proporz* seems to work in small states only.

That is not to say that the topic of our paper is of only marginal and limited relevance to comparative research. For it is evident that the pattern of conflict management described as *Proporz* has much in common with the phenomenon of “organized pluralism”.<sup>5</sup> The *most* salient fact is that *Proporz* as well as “organized pluralism” are non-competitive *systems* in which issues are settled by *amicabilis compositio*, i.e. by negotiated agreement rather than by majority. No doubt it is not by accident that the “organized pluralism” of interest groups is more highly developed in Austria and Switzerland than in most other industrialized countries. Thus our topic may lead us to reconsider critically current political typologies which disregard non-competitive conflict management in favour of the competitive pattern on the one hand and the centralized bureaucratic and authoritarian patterns on the other. This disregard, incidentally, may be due to the fact that only the latter patterns have been accepted by constitutional theory; it thus reflects legalistic traditions of our discipline untouched by methodological progress.

We propose an alternative classification of political systems of the liberal-democratic type according to the predominance of one of the following patterns

- a) The competitive pattern of conflict management (the fundamental device of which is the majority principle);
- t) the non-competitive, “cartelized” pluralist pattern (which works by *amicabilis compositio*, “amicable agreement”);
- c) conflict management by an. interaction of bureaucratic arbitration (which works by hierarchy) and democratic control.

The third pattern seems to be characteristic of some larger countries of continental Europe which we propose to label “demo-bureaucratic systems”. In these countries - especially in France, Italy and Germany - liberal democracy originated in parliamentary control of the monarchic-bureaucratic executive, and this distribution of roles is still largely characteristic of the structure of parliamentary government :Political parties are not really

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<sup>5</sup> Dahl, *op.cit.*, 395

competitive leadership parties, and control of the executive power, instead of taking over executive leadership, is a predominant element in the role perceptions of legislators. This is particularly evident in the political culture of France and in French theories of parliamentary government, but West Germany's political culture too is still largely marked by the demo-bureaucratic pattern and is not as fully competitive as it might seem to the foreign observer.

These patterns, which are transmitted in the socialization processes of political elites, may of course intermingle and supplant each other in the course of historical developments.

Developmental typologies which tend to explain patterns of conflict management by socio-economic factors alone and that neglect those intervening variables may lead to rather faulty projections of development trends. Particularly if we want to predict the future evolution of "developing countries" or of the "socialist camp", we should consider that even an evolution towards a more "pluralistic" system might not render this a really competitive one. Historical circumstances may instead favour the coming into existence of norms of conflict management which are of the demo-bureaucratic or of the non-competitive *Proporz* type.

## Summary

Liberal democracies may be classified in three types of management of political conflicts. The competitive pattern of conflict management, the fundamental device of which is the majority principle, is not (as postulated, in some current typologies with a normative or teleological bias) the "normal" type. There exist two other patterns 1) the "demo-bureaucratic" systems of the larger states of Continental Europe, characterized by the interaction of bureaucratic arbitration of conflicts and democratic control; 2) the non-competitive, "cartelized" systems, in which important conflicts are settled not by the (often unworkable) majority principle but by negotiated "amicable agreements" and proportional distribution of office among all important groups. An analysis of the latter type (as exemplified by Switzerland, Austria and Lebanon) leads to the conclusion that social structure alone does not explain the typological differences of these three patterns. We have to take into account the norms of conflict management which have originated under specific historical conditions and form an important part of the political culture of the elites. We may specify some functional conditions of efficiency of non-competitive systems, but it seems impossible to claim a generally higher degree of efficiency for the competitive type.

## Résumé

On peut classer les démocraties libérales selon les modes de règlement des conflits politiques, dont nous distinguerons trois types. Le modèle compétitif, qui utilise comme son principe fondamental la décision majoritaire, n'est pas (comme cela est supposé dans certaines typologies courantes, à caractère normatif ou téléologique) le type «normal». Il existe deux autres modèles 1) les systèmes «démocratie-bureaucratiques» des grands États de l'Europe continentale, caractérisés par l'interaction de l'arbitrage bureaucratique des conflits et du contrôle démocratique, 2) les systèmes non-compétitifs et «cartélisés» où les conflits importants sont réglés non par le principe majoritaire (qui souvent ne fonctionne pas ici) mais par des accords amiables négociés entre tous les groupes importants et par la distribution proportionnelle des emplois publics. Une analyse du dernier type (avec, comme exemples, la Suisse, l'Autriche et le Liban) nous conduit à la conclusion qu'on ne peut expliquer les différences typologiques de ces trois modèles par la seule structure sociale. Il faut considérer aussi les normes de règlement des conflits politiques qui ont pris naissance dans des conditions historiques spécifiques et qui forment une partie importante de la «culture politique» des élites. Nous pouvons indiquer quelques conditions fonctionnelles d'efficacité des systèmes non-compétitifs, mais il ne semble pas possible de prétendre, d'une manière générale, qu'ils soient moins efficaces que les systèmes compétitifs.