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A Comparative Analysis of the Implementation of 'Consensus Democracy' in China and Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

The Consensus Democracy Theory, put forward by Lijphart, emphasizes the construction of a multi-consensus democracy. Switzerland is a typical country putting consensus democracy theory into practice. Its consensus democracy belief is rooted in its historical development and domestic political practice, and has become a typical case of practice and research. China also has the soil of consensus democratic theory, that is, the exploration and practice of the fundamental political system of multiparty cooperation and political consultation under the leadership of the Communist Party of China. As one of the three basic political systems in China, the practice of Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) system has prominent significance for the development of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Swiss democracy shares similarities with CPPCC because of the same theoretical model between China and Switzerland. On the other hand, differences exist resulting from different

social systems and historical development. Exploring the similarities and differences is of positive significance for the further development of socialist democratic politics with Chinese characteristics in the new era.

Key Words: Consensus democratic theory, Swiss democracy, Multi-party Cooperation, Political Consultation System, Communist Party, China

Introduction

The theory of Consensus Democracy, proposed by Arend Lijphart,¹ posits a democratic regime built upon the construction of pluralistic consensus. Switzerland, being one of the case studies Lijphart drew upon, has been considered as an exemplary model for the empirical analysis of Consensus Democracy in practice.² Concurrently, China has been actively exploring and implementing Consensus Democracy under the auspices of Chinese paths to modernization. The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) represents the epitome of China's adoption and integration of the quintessence of Consensus Democracy theory into its governance practices. Thus, articulating and comparing the experiences of Switzerland and China with respect to the practice of Consensus Democracy is of positive significance for China's adherence to Xi Jinping's thought on socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era and for the enhancement of Chinese governance system and the modernization of governance capabilities.

The Origins of Consensus Democracy Theory

Democracy originates from ancient Greece and was widely prevalent across various city-states as an institution.³ The citizens as the primary agents of democratic systems of that time

¹ Arend Lijphart, "Democratic Political Systems," *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 1, no. 1 (January 1989): 33–48, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0951692889001001003>

² Ibid.

³ Anthony J. McGann and Michael Latner, "The Calculus of Consensus Democracy," *Comparative Political*

were not the majority in their polities; the theorists represented by Aristotle, however, maintained that, “the adjudication of political matters from the will of the majority is just, for the will of the majority is justice itself.” The belief of “Majoritarian Democracy” gradually became the mainstay of European democratic evolution and served as a guiding principle, in a certain sense, for the establishment of democratic systems in various nations. With the development of economies and politics, however, the Westminster model of Majoritarian Democracy displayed characteristics of inadequacy in adapting to the diversifying trends in certain countries. Until the middle and late twentieth century, various conflicts and divisions, including ethnicity, clearly demonstrated the difficulty of adapting to the current state of development of traditional majority democratic theories, which emphasized majority victory as a source of legitimacy for democratization through competition and confrontation among members of society in democratic countries, particularly those in the process of democratization.⁴ In this context, on the basis of Robert Dahl’s theory of pluralistic democracy emphasizing the value consensus in democratic political life, Lijphart chose four Western European countries as samples, namely the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria and Switzerland who had pluralistic politics and cultures and stable political system. Lijphart emphasized the elimination of the splitting tendency of political culture in pluralistic societies through consultation, pluralistic cooperation and interactive cooperation of political elites and integrated it into a consensus-based stable and harmonious democracy.

After that, Lijphart put forward the theory of consensus democracy through further study of democratic systems in 36 countries which is the further development of the theory of harmonious democracy with a wider range of subjects, and involves many aspects of economic and political conflicts including class and race⁵. During this process, “reaching consensus” is

Studies 46, no. 7 (June 10, 2013): 823–50, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414012463883>.

⁴ Daniel Bochsler and Andreas Juon, “Power-Sharing and the Quality of Democracy,” *European Political Science Review* 13, no. 4 (November 1, 2021): 411–30, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773921000151>.

⁵ Crepaz, Markus M. L., and Arend Lijphart. “Linking and Integrating Corporatism and Consensus Democracy: Theory, Concepts and Evidence.” *British Journal of Political Science* 25, no. 2 (1995): 281–88.

the focus of Lijphart upgrading coalition democracy to consensus democracy, and the structural configuration of the political system and the degree of decentralization are the keys to reaching consensus.⁶

The Practice of Consensus Democracy in Switzerland

Switzerland, as a paragon of Consensus Democracy, has a distinctively diverse history that manifests itself in the construction of its executive and legislative branches, as well as in its party system.⁷

Swiss model of Consensus Democracy is rooted in a rich historical context. During the Roman era, the inhabitants in Swiss territory consisted of multiple ethnic groups including Germans, Gauls, and Burgundians. The Swiss cultural scholar Denis de Rougemont wrote in his memoir “Recollections of a European” that “Switzerland is not a nation but a community of defense.” After the reconsolidations through many wars, Switzerland promulgated its constitution in 1848, marking the birth of a modern state. The historical evolution of Switzerland demonstrates a long-standing political backdrop of ethnic and cultural plurality. The characteristics of Swiss diversity were clearly outlined in its constitution of 1848, where different political cultural doctrines were represented.

In terms of the executive branch, the Swiss Federal Council, a collective head of state composed of a seven-member council, exercises national executive power. The composition of this council vividly demonstrates Switzerland’s pursuit of coordination and consensus. Since 1959, the distribution of party representation among the seven members has followed a fixed ratio of 2:2:2:1 known colloquially as the “Magic Formula,” from Free Democratic Party,

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123400007195>.

⁶ Arend Lijphart and Markus M. L. Crepaz, “Corporatism and Consensus Democracy in Eighteen Countries: Conceptual and Empirical Linkages,” *British Journal of Political Science* 21, no. 2 (April 1991): 235–46, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0007123400006128>.

⁷ Wolf Linder and Sean Mueller, “Consensus Democracy: The Swiss System of Power-Sharing,” *Swiss Democracy*, 2021, 167–207, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-63266-3_5.

Christian Democratic People's Party, Social Democratic Party, and Swiss People's Party respectively. Additionally, there is an unwritten customary requirement for election to the council that members should be selected with a 4:2:1 ratio according to linguistic distribution of German-, French-, and Italian-speaking regions of Switzerland. This composition ensures a degree of representation for the diverse parties, ethnicities, and languages within Switzerland. Regarding their powers, the members of the council are equal in status and have equivalent powers in principle, with each member responsible for one of the seven federal departments: Foreign Affairs, Home Affairs, Justice and Police, Finance, Defense, Public Economy, and Transport, Communications and Energy. In decision-making, the council emphasizes temperate collective deliberation, prioritizing practical issues over party politics or partisan predispositions.⁸

As for the legislative branch, the Swiss Federal Assembly is bicameral, consisting of the Council of States (upper house) and the National Council (lower house). The parliamentary system balances the interests of different cantons and interest groups through representative elections and a system of checks and balances. In terms of election methods, representatives for the National Council are directly elected on a proportional basis, except in cantons that adopt a majority voting system; each canton, regardless of size, is represented by two members in the Council of States, while each half-canton has one representative. This system of representative election effectively ensures a relative parity of power among the cantons. In terms of checks and balances, Switzerland employs a strong bicameral system where both houses have fundamentally equal legislative powers, facilitating an effective restraining mechanism between them. Furthermore, the Swiss Federal Assembly possesses the unique features of "direct legislation" and "citizen initiative," where federal laws can be put to a national vote if 50,000 signatures from voters are collected within 90 days or if proposed by eight cantons. If the draft pass in the popular referendum, it automatically becomes law.

Regarding the party system, Switzerland is a multiparty state. Unlike the confrontational

⁸ Bernauer, Julian, and Adrian Vatter. *Power diffusion and democracy: Institutions, deliberation and outcomes*. Cambridge University Press, 2019.

party politics in other multiparty systems, the Swiss political atmosphere is comparatively mild. Since national parliamentary elections are conducted by canton, Swiss political parties are grounded within individual cantons rather than on a national level. This results in a rather loose party organizational structure in Switzerland and allows for swift reorganization and transformation, making the formation of a dominant single party difficult. Furthermore, the Swiss executive system does not encourage citizens to pin their hopes for an effective government on one or several majority parties. Hence, a Herculean figure—a hero in the mold of Hector—rarely emerges within the Swiss political milieu.

From macro perspective, Swiss democratic system is characterized by a strong elite political culture, which is an important aspect of the consociation democracy described by Lijphart. Swiss citizens elect cantonal representatives, conferring legitimacy, while the seven-member executive council responsible for national administration is selected by the Swiss parliament, exemplifying a blend of representative and direct democracy in Swiss political life.

In sum, the notion of consensus democracy in Switzerland is reflected in the institutional design of its national administration, legislative body, and party system, exerting significant influence.

The Practice of Consensus Democracy in China

Within the framework of building socialist system with Chinese characteristics, on the premise of the sinicization of Marxism, China has made substantial achievements in democratic reform and development. In this process, China has assimilated the quintessence of consensus democracy theory, applying and integrating it into various aspects of the Chinese political system, thus advancing the evolution of Sinicized consensus democracy.⁹

Firstly, the socialist system with Chinese characteristics provides an excellent systemic environment. Notwithstanding its origins in the democratic traditions of several small Western European nations, the principles of consensus, diverse representation, and moderation in

⁹ Guangbin Yang, “Consensus Democracy,” in *The Historical Dynamics of Chinese Politics. China Insights.*, vol. 3 July 2022 (Singapore: Springer, 2022), 295–304, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-1392-1_28.

addressing political matters are harmonious with China's socialist system. The very essence and crux of China's socialist democratic politics lies in the fact that the people are the ultimate authority and strive for the attainment of fairness and justice. The Communist Party of China assumes the helm and oversees the entirety of the situation, while all political parties in China engage in political consultation, democratic supervision, and participation in the discussion and management of state affairs led by CPC.¹⁰ The position of the people as masters of the country safeguard effectively the catholicity of consensus democracy. The unwavering leadership of CPC, in tandem with like-minded other political parties in terms of state governance, guarantees the intricacies and inclusiveness in solving political problems and developing democracies.

Secondly, after the reform and opening up, the diversification of China's actual national conditions is the natural soil of Chinese consensus. At the macro-organizational level, this diversity is concentrated in various civil society organizations, companies and foundations gathered for the same occupation and social groups. At the level of individual citizens, with the deepening of reform and opening up, China has shown a trend of pluralistic differentiation of interests, values and identities. Under the socialist market economy, the values of citizens of different occupations and social levels will naturally develop and divide, replacing the previous "workers, peasants, soldiers, learners and businessman and giving birth to the so-called "new social class".

Against the aforementioned backdrop, China's current fundamental political system and the three basic political systems manifest, to some extent, the demands of consensus democracy. Among them, CPPCC, under the aegis of the multi-party cooperation and political consultation system led by CPC, has become the most efficacious embodiment of consensus democracy in the Chinese mode, courtesy of its unique organizational form and mode of operation. The organization and work of the CPPCC fully accord with the spirit and demands of consensus democracy. The organizational structure and the nature of work within the CPPCC align

¹⁰ Yang, G.B., "Consensus Model in Chinese Decision-Making Process [J].," *Social Science Research*, (2) (2017): 39-49.

comprehensively with the ethos and demands of consensus democracy. In terms of organizational structure, CPPCC primarily consists of a patriotic united front organization, which accepts the leadership of Communist Party of China, including those led by CPC, other political parties, and personages without party affiliation, representatives from Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan, and representatives of overseas Chinese returnees from all walks of society. These people do not compete against one another in their daily work within CPPCC but instead are united by a shared commitment to serve their homeland with wholehearted, sincere cooperation. Moreover, the leading status of CPC has formed through the long history of national struggle since modern times. Long-standing historical practice has demonstrated CPC's capability to lead the people towards national rejuvenation. Hence, the leadership status of CPC within CPPCC is also a concentration of consensus and recognition. Additionally, the daily operations of CPPCC are an actualization of the theoretical spirit of consensus democracy. As noted earlier, following the economic reform and opening up, the diversification trend in China's civil society has strengthened CPPCC's work, along with that of its members, contributes to the convergence of consensus within a pluralistic society, thereby proffering more incisive recommendations for state governance. The grassroots efforts of CPPCC, including diverse consultative gatherings, will eventually be elevated to the realm of national democratic politics by CPPCC's platform. This process is one of the pivotal means for CPPCC to foster the collective agreement of the entire population through the ethos of consensus democracy.

Commonalities between Swiss and Chinese consensus practice

Swiss consensus practice is reflected in the administrative system, legislative system, party system and other aspects of its national political system. Under the background of socialism with Chinese characteristics, China's consensus is integrated into China's political system with its theoretical spirit to a certain extent, and is prominently manifested in CPPCC, China's highest-level advisory body. Both of them share commonalities in practicing consensus theory.

The consensus emphasizes the importance of integrating pluralistic consensus through tolerance and non-confrontation in view of the competition and confrontation among political

parties, departments and different social groups which is reflected in the consensus practice of Swiss and China. As mentioned earlier, the seven-member Committee responsible for the executive power of the state in Switzerland follows the traditional principle of joint decision-making and mutual agreement when exercising its functions and making decisions, and in most cases does not give priority to discussing party affairs that may cause differences. At the same time, when CPPCC performs its basic functions, it also prioritize “consultation” over all other work. As a specialized consultative body of the socialist consultative, CPPCC is committed to integrating the voices of different social groups through consultation, promoting unity and cooperation, and building consensus and synergy.

Both sides pay attention to the role of political elites in the process of practice. It is one of the important contents of Lijphart Consensus to give full play to the role of political elites in integrating heterogeneous and diversified environment to stabilize system. Swiss democracy politics is basically a combination of direct and representative democracy. People exercise their rights by electing members to parliament. This group of members and the members of the seven-member Committee elected by them have ample room to play their elite role. This group of parliamentarians, as well as the members of the Committee of Seven from which they emerge, have more than ample room to play their elite roles.

The composition of CPPCC members also reflects the characteristics of political elites. Because of the nature of other political parties, compared with CPC, they have specific requirements for the identity, occupation and educational background. In addition, other people from all walks of life who are nominated and recommended to the CPPCC have made great achievements in their respective fields. It can be seen that the political elites have ensured the implementation of the consensus theory in Swiss politics and the practice of the CPPCC through their own great political literacy.

The differences between Swiss and Chinese consensus practice and their reasons

Compared the practice of consensus democracy in Switzerland and China, significant differences exist due to the different social systems and historical cultures, different actors, targets and ways of implementing the spirit of consensus democracy based on the democratic

political system.

Great differences exist in terms of subjects implementing the consensus, parties and party systems. Switzerland is a multi-party country, and several major parties maintain the number of members in proportion to the seven-member committee. Due to the great influence of Swiss consensus, there is no extremely fierce competition among many parties in Switzerland in most cases, which maintains the stability of the national system. It is the wide existence of these political parties representing diversified interests and their outstanding achievements under politics that makes the Swiss Consensus regarded as a model of practice. Although the populist transformation trend of the Swiss People's Party has brought challenges to its party politics and the practice of consensus since the end of the 20th century, its major party identity kept unchanged. China is a multiparty cooperation political system under the leadership of the CPC. As the leading political party, "the CPC exercises overall leadership over all areas of endeavor in every part of the country." This determines the working mechanism of the practice of consensus by the CPPCC under the absolute leadership of a ruling party.

There are also differences in terms of behavior object of implementing the consensus, that is, the relevant system and its purpose. Swiss consensus is embodied in its administrative and judicial system, which serves the implementation of politics and the management of the country. Although the consensus of the CPPCC is similar with the traditional western consensus theory in performance, it essentially serves the consensus of socialism with Chinese characteristics. The CPPCC is neither an administrative body nor a legislative body for governing the country, but offers suggestions for the CPC to govern the country by rallying the strength of some specific social groups.

Big differences exist in the ways of electing the subjects implementing the consensus. In Switzerland, it carries out by "bottom-up" pattern, and members of parliament are mostly elected by the people on a cantonal basis. In China, the CPPCC members are elected by "recommendation consultation", that is, most CPPCC members are nominated and recommended by their units, and then approved and negotiated by the CPC Party Committee. Most Chinese citizens do not directly participate in the selection of the CPPCC members.

Exploring the reasons for the above differences lies in the different social systems and

different historical cultures of the two countries. In terms of social system, Switzerland is a typical European capitalist country, adopting parliamentary system. China, on the other hand, is a socialist state under the people's democratic dictatorship with Marxism as its guiding ideology.

With the continuous sinicization of Marxism, China's consensus practice will eventually serve the Millennium plan of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. At the same time, the CPPCC, as an important platform for China to practice consensus, is also an original political achievement of Chinese socialism, which is of great significance. In terms of history and culture, Swiss citizens have a strong sense of participation in politics because of their long-term tradition and education. Because of the feudal rule for thousands of years and the direct leap from semi-colonial and semi-feudal society to socialist society, Chinese citizens need to strengthen consciousness of democracy and participating in the discussion and management of state affairs. Therefore, it is of particular importance to further exert the influence of Chinese consensus through the platform of the CPPCC.

Conclusion

The practices of consensus democracy in Switzerland and China both draw theoretical sustenance from Lijphart's consensus democracy theory and share certain commonalities. Nevertheless, attributable to differences in social systems and historical cultures, they also exhibit many dissimilarities. Analyzing Swiss as a model of consensus democracy practice and comparing it with China's consensus practice-based CPPCC will help promote the development of socialist politics with Chinese characteristics in the new era and promote the modernization of national governance system and governance capacity.