Austria (1945–66), Belgium (from 1919), and the Netherlands (1917–67). These societies were divided by religion and ideology. In the Netherlands, for example, Catholics and Protestants constituted separate religious pillars, while the Social Democrats and Liberals formed less densely organized secular groups. Andeweg and Irwin (2009, p. 21) describe how the religious pillars structured lives in the 1950s: a typical Catholic would have been born of Catholic parents in a Catholic hospital, received a Catholic education, joined the Catholic Boy Scouts, played soccer for a Catholic team, married another Catholic, joined a Catholic trade union, read a Catholic newspaper, died in a Catholic home for the elderly, and been buried in a Catholic graveyard by a Catholic undertaker.

The leaders of the various pillars negotiated the slicing of the national pie. This elite accommodation operated on the basis of informal rules: for example, that distributions should reflect the relative population size of each group, and that each group should retain a minority veto over matters it judged vital to its own interests. Elite commitment to a policy of live-and-let-live overcame the potential instability caused by cultural conflict at mass level.

In a way, political business resembled international diplomacy, with the leaders of each pillar acting in confidential negotiations almost as if they represented a separate country. As with the international norm of non-intervention in states’ domestic affairs, each pillar was left in control of the resources it was allocated. Catholic leaders might give priority to welfare within their community, Protestants might allocate more money to their schools, and the Social Democrats might choose to develop their newspapers. In what amounted to informal federalism, a culture of accommodation among the elites allowed separate communities to live together in a single state. The pillars supported the roof of the state, while the roof protected the pillars.

The pillars have crumbled as religious divisions have weakened. Nonetheless, elite compromise remains a key theme in several European democracies, not just the Netherlands. On Belgium, for instance, Deschouwer (2009, p. 7) reports that despite a ‘depillarization of the minds’ in a country previously divided into Catholic, socialist, and liberal segments, ‘the pillar organizations are still very visible and do play a role in political decision-making’. So, Lijphart’s formulation remains a practical demonstration of how elite political culture can be detached from the wider group in a way that contributes to overall stability.

Three qualifications are in order. First, the key role of elite culture means that consociational democracy is more than a matter of institutional arrangements; it cannot be expected to flourish in all conditions. In particular, what worked for the Netherlands in the 1950s will not necessarily succeed in low-income countries emerging from internal conflict. Second, elite accommodation can also be seen as an elite cartel, limiting popular influence in national politics; it is a brake on, as much as a form of, democracy. Third, there is a danger that empowering the pillars will simply reinforce them, slowing the long-term process of integration between divided groups (McGarry and O’Leary, 2006).

Political culture in authoritarian states

Just as Almond and Verba argued that stable liberal democracies are underpinned by a civic culture, so Welzel and Inglehart (2005, 2009) suggest that many...