Do the results of elections express the will of the people?

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Abstract

The paper discusses if the results of the elections express the will of the people. The paper talks about this point by examining how different systems affect results, how a choice of the people exists, and Social Complexity in a modern democracy. After that, the paper found that the will of the people, as an abstract and romantic notion, is nearly impossible to identify in a way that can usefully instruct governments.

Keywords: people's will, government

Introduction

In recent decades, most countries have transformed their regimes with democratic components. Elections have been crucial in popular governments since the Roman People first exercised their citizenship rights in their republic. Currently, even most authoritarian nations have symbolic elections to assert their legitimacy. Russia has its presidential election every six years, China has its national party's congress every five years, and Iran's legislators are popularly elected. Most countries use the election of representatives as the primary method for showing their democratic credentials. Although China declares that its democracy differs from Western representative democracies, its structure is still a parliamentary system with indirect elections. However, recent disorders have brought usual systems into question. In the US, Brazil, and Nigeria, elections seem to act as a catalyst for sharpening social cleavages. Are problems with elections causing democratic illusions to crumble? Or is the problem that elections are not the best way of expressing democracy?

Most representative democracies choose representatives and policies by majority vote. Elections are one institution designed to express voters', or at least the majority's, wishes. However, to assess whether or not elections can express something like a "people's will," two requirements must be met. First, the only variable affecting the result of the election should be the people's will. Second, measuring or approximating a person's will would have to be possible. I will now discuss each point.

How different systems affect results

First, I suggest that if the results of elections do express the people's will, then the only variable affecting the election's outcome should be the people's will. If other variables, such as election systems or nomination systems, would alter the result in an election, this would mean that factors other than the people's will are changing election results. Furthermore, different election systems express voters' preferences differently and to different degrees. In the case of the US, the institutions of the Senate and electoral colleges strengthen the voice of states with smaller populations. At the same time, the House of Congress represents the general ideas of the country.

Studies show that different electoral and nomination systems would give rise to preferences for parties based on the scale of sizes. In most cases, the plurality system prefers large parties with homogenous representation, while the proportional system favors small parties with diversified models. In a plurality system, voters may choose one of the candidates, and the people with the most votes win the seat. In a proportional system, people vote for their party. There is no clear evidence that one can better represent the people. Neither system is necessarily unfair to the parties not favored in these cases. However, a severe distortion of the results of different systems calls the election into question.

Currently, most nations adopt three distinctive election systems for their legislature: the majoritarian, proportional, and mixed systems. These systems respectively favor large parties, small parties, or a mixture. In the plurality system, most seats in the legislature are monopolized by large parties, whereas the proportional system favors small parties. Even in the same country, there is a different result in the two systems. The key factor affecting the outcome of the election is not the people's will but the electoral system. Though the people will still affect the result if a sufficient number of people vote, the electoral system is still an essential factor.

Besides election systems, nominations also decide the candidate's competitiveness. Based on a study of results for the US Democratic Party in the last century, authors found clear evidence that candidates nominated by caucus were more competitive than candidates nominated by the regular primaries. In traditionally Democratic areas, the researchers looked at results in the regions that

had a caucus system for nominating candidates. They compared those that used the more divisive primary for selection. From 1932 to 1992, the difference was as much as 31%: the Democratic Party lost 53% in the primary states but won 78% in the non-divisive and caucus states. This is a huge difference, providing strong evidence that nomination systems are a significant factor that can alter the results of elections. Changing the electoral system means changing the election's results, whereas the people's will remains nearly unchanged. If different electoral systems can simulate the people's will, the result should be similar rather than a tremendous difference. Based on this finding, I conclude that elections cannot express the people's will.

Does a Will of the People exist?

Arguments about the idea of a "people's will" also call elections into question. The people's will could not be expressed if no such thing existed. Albert Weale argues that the "will of the people" is an illusion, and in a sense, this seems correct. The idea of the will of the people is abstract and hard to grasp, whereas finding the will of one person seems more accessible. Based on the analysis of a person's will, it becomes easier to discover the relationship between one person and a group of people. In the case of one person, the "will" could be simply a goal, such as economic growth, with or without a specific method to attain it, or it could be a particular policy that one person would like a government to conduct, such as laissez-faire policy.

To define the abstract concept of the people's will, it is easier to start by finding out the will of a single person and analyzing the relationship between that person and others. It is a relatively easy task to find the will of two individuals, and based on the will of those two, it should be easy to find the will of the people within a city, a province, or a nation. One person's will, for understanding, can be defined as one, and the will of two people shall be the part that overlaps, and it is less than one and never more than one and no less than zero. On the scale of a whole nation, the wills of individuals will rarely overlap 100% because it is impossible for everyone to have identical ideas. However, there are groups of people with similar views and preferences that largely overlap, and they can be precisely described by different tags. These tags could be race, ethnicity, sex, religion, and class. It is hard to form a unified will of the people, but the will of groups is easy to describe and orientate. In fact, during elections, different candidates have their target groups. They are not advocating for the people but for certain groups whose votes they expect to get in high numbers. It is all about competition between different groups of people and compromises among groups. No "will of the people" can be precisely identified and measured because the individuals and groups comprising it differ.

Currently, most governments derive their legitimacy through ideas born in the Enlightenment. Rousseau used the concept of a social contract to describe the relationship between the government and the people. Based on this idea, the government can represent the people, but "the people" are not just the majority. It is impossible just to derive legitimate power from the majority while overlooking the appeal of minorities. This is why the words "middle class," "women," and the names of specific ethnic groups are so essential and appear more frequently in political campaigns than just "the people."

Put differently, the "will of the people" does not exist as an empirical fact. But this does not mean it has no significance. The idea has played an effective part in political systems in different nations. It can be compared with a circle in geometry. There is a circumcenter and equal radius. However, no perfect circle can be drawn in the real world. Yet, there are always ways to make it more precise. The ideal will of the people may be an illusion. Still, the institutions and processes that pursue and try to approximate the idea of people's will are essential for respecting citizens and the system of democracy.

Social Complexity in modern democracy

Even if elections cannot fully express a people's will, it seems crucial to consider another question: Should modern democracies, primarily through elections, seek to represent the will of the whole people or all the citizens? As I have said, it is not just individuals who have different demands and preferences but also people from other classes, sexes, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and regions. No policy can satisfy everyone's needs, and merely meeting the most numerous groups will increase social cleavages.

Compromise among people of different identities is necessary in a modern democracy. The first modern republic – the United States – created a Senate and a bicameral system that other countries followed. This example illustrates the importance of compromise between states with larger and smaller populations. In the Federalist Papers, Alexander Hamilton discusses the need to find a compromise between the claims of larger and smaller States but also says that each state should have equal representation in one council and be regarded as an independent and sovereign State.

Among countries with a legislative system, seventy-eight

states modeled their legislature on the US model with its bicameral system. In most cases, legislatures' upper houses always have equal numbers of representatives from each subnational administrative division, regardless of the population within the division. For example, in the United States, the Russian Federation, the United Mexican States, and the Federal Republic of Nigeria, each upper house has two, two, and three deputies, respectively. It is designed in this format because of the phenomenon within the current election system. Once representation is based only on population size, the distribution of resources and initiation of policies is inevitably transferred to the administrative division with the largest population within the nation. In the long term, this is vital to the nation's continuation. Suppose one group's interests and preferences are significantly underestimated. In that case, this will produce dissatisfaction, and, in some cases, fan desires to secede from the current system to pursue an independent policy to protect a group's or region's interests. One example is the quotas benefiting minorities. It also extends the representation of different minorities.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have set out three different lines of reasoning that show that elections can never fully express a people's will. First, elections are affected by other variables that alter the election result. Furthermore, the will of the people, as an abstract and idealistic notion, is nearly impossible to identify in a way that can usefully instruct governments. Finally, modern democratic states must represent distinct groups of people, not just "the people" as a whole. One of the main themes in contemporary politics is the presence of different groups of people who need to work together and strike compromises. Just as there is no perfect circle, there can be no ideal political system. However, pursuing a perfect process and a system that speaks for everyone is a long-lasting goal of all human beings.

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