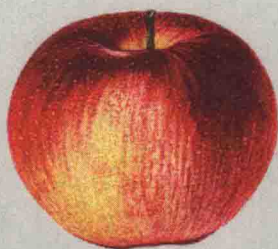


Why Bother with Elections?



ADAM
PRZEWORSKI

"No one knows more about elections than Adam Przeworski or understands better what is at stake in them. This little book distills the hard-won political wisdom of a lifetime. It could scarcely be more timely."

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ADAM PRZEWORSKI is Carroll and Milton Petrie Professor of Politics and (by courtesy) of Economics at New York University.

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Adam Przeworski

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Preface

This book is a summary of our current collective understanding of the method by which some societies decide who would govern them and how: elections. While I rely heavily on my own research, I draw extensively on work of others. Because the book is intended to be accessible to the general educated public, I dispose with the usual academic etiquette, which consists of acknowledging the source of every idea and every fact. I decided to provide sources of direct quotes but not to reference the origins of other inspirations. Hence, I owe an apology to those of my colleagues who will recognize themselves as authors of ideas anonymously presented below.

“Collective understanding” does not mean that scholars studying elections agree on everything. I try to report differences of views and beliefs, as well as aspects of elections about which we are not clear, but I am certain that some people will still disagree with some of what follows. Hence, the reader is urged to read this book critically, forming opinions of his or her own.

For comments on earlier drafts I owe gratitude to John Dunn, Roberto Gargarella, Fernando Limongi, Zhaotian Luo, Bernard Manin, Pasquale Pasquino, and Ruben Ruíz-Rufino, as well as to three anonymous reviewers.

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I

Introduction

We select our governments through elections. Parties propose policies and present candidates, we vote, someone is declared winner according to pre-established rules, the winner moves into the government office and the loser goes home. Glitches do sometimes occur but mostly the process works smoothly. We are governed for a few years and then have a chance to decide whether to retain the incumbents or throw the rascals out. All of this is so routine that we take it for granted.

As familiar as this experience is, elections are a perplexing phenomenon. In a typical election about one in two voters ends up on the losing side. In presidential systems the winner rarely receives much more than 50 percent of the vote and in parliamentary multi-party systems the largest share is rarely higher than 40 percent. Moreover, many people who voted for the winners are dismayed with their performance in office. So most of us are left disappointed, either with the outcome or with the performance of the winner. Yet, election after election, most of us hope that our favorite candidate

will win the next time around and will not disappoint. Hope and disappointment, disappointment and hope: something is strange. The only analogy I can think of is sport: my soccer team, Arsenal, has not won the championship in many years but every new season I still hope it will. After all, in other realms of life we adjust our expectations on the basis of past experience. But not in elections. The siren song of elections is just irresistible. Is it irrational?

Questions concerning the value of elections as a mechanism by which we collectively choose who will govern us and how they will do it have become particularly urgent in the last few years. In many democracies large numbers of people feel that elections only perpetuate the rule of “establishment,” “elites,” or even “caste” (“*casta*” in the language of the Spanish *Podemos* party), while at the other extreme many are alarmed by the rise of “populist,” xenophobic, repressive, and often racist, parties. These attitudes are intensely held on both sides, generating deep divisions, “polarization,” and are interpreted by various pundits as a “crisis of democracy” or at least as a sign of dissatisfaction with the very institution of elections. Survey results show that people in general and young people in particular now consider it less “essential” than in the past to live in a country that is governed democratically – all of which supports the claim that democracy is in crisis (Foa and Mounk 2016).

Yet there is nothing “undemocratic” about the electoral victory of Donald Trump or the rise of anti-establishment parties in Europe. It is even more paradoxical to claim the same about results of various referendums, whether about Brexit or about constitutional reform (but implicitly Europe) in Italy: referendums are supposed to be an instrument of “direct democracy,” regarded by some as superior to representative democracy. Moreover, while the label of “fascist” is carelessly brandished to stigmatize these political forces, such

parties, unlike those of the 1930s, do not advocate replacing elections by some other way of selecting rulers. They may be seen as ugly – most people view racism and xenophobia as ugly – but these parties do campaign under the slogan of returning to “the people” the power usurped by elites, which they see as strengthening democracy. In the words of a Trump advertisement: “Our movement is about replacing a failed and corrupt political establishment with a new government controlled by you, the American people” (<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vST61W4bGm8>>). Marine Le Pen promised to call for a referendum on Europe, in which “you, the people, will decide.” They are not anti-democratic. Moreover, there is nothing anti-democratic about people wanting to have a “strong” or “competent and effective” government – responses to survey questions, which have increased in frequency during recent years and which some commentators interpret as a symptom of declining support for democracy. Schumpeter (1942) certainly wanted governments to be able to govern and to govern competently, and I do not see why other democrats would not.

Dissatisfaction with the results of elections is not the same as dissatisfactions with elections as a mechanism of collective decision-making. True, finding oneself on the losing side is disagreeable. Surveys do show that satisfaction with democracy is higher among those who voted for the winners rather than the losers. Moreover, having been offered a choice, the fact that parties presented distinct platforms in the electoral campaign is valued by the winners more than by the losers. But what people value most in elections is just being able to vote for a party that represents their views, even when they end up on the losing side (based on Harding’s 2011 study of 40 surveys in 38 countries between 2001 and 2006). When people react against “the establishment,” they often just mean either that no party represents their views or that

governments change without an effect on their lives, indicating that elections do not generate change. But we can, and a large majority does, value the mechanism of elections even when we do not like their outcomes.

Why should and why do we value elections as a method for selecting by whom and how we wish to be governed? What are their virtues, their weaknesses, and their limitations? My purpose is to examine such questions, taking elections as they realistically are, with all their blemishes and warts, and to distill their effects on various aspects of our collective well-being. I argue below that some popular criticisms of elections – specifically that they offer no choice and that individual electoral participation is ineffective – are mistaken, based on an incorrect understanding of elections as a mechanism by which we decide as a collectivity. I contend that, in societies in which people have different interests and divergent values, looking for rationality (or “justice”) is futile, but that elections provide an instruction to governments to minimize the dissatisfaction with how we are governed. Whether governments follow these instructions (“responsiveness”) and whether elections serve to remove governments that do not (“accountability”) is more questionable: governments that are egregious are subject to electoral sanctions but their margin to escape responsibility is large. I fear that the perennial expectation for elections to have the effect of reducing economic inequality is tenuous in societies in which productive property is held only by a few and in which markets unequally distribute incomes – “capitalism.” The greatest value of elections, for me by itself sufficient to cherish them, is that at least under some conditions they allow us to process in relative liberty and civic peace whatever conflicts arise in society, that they prevent violence.

This is a minimalist, “Churchillian,” perspective, a view that admits that elections are not pretty, that they are never