



Do Elections Express the Will of the People

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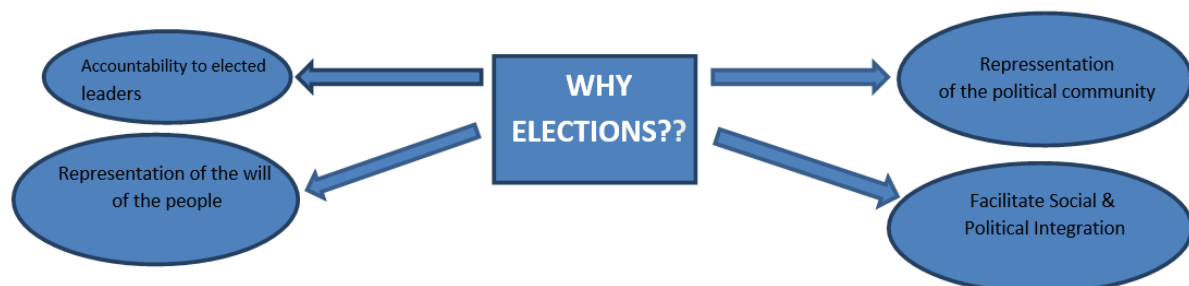
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I. Introduction

As an inalienable part of the framework of most modern nation states, elections are almost as vital as the people they bring into power. Despite their incredible operational complexity, they serve a simple purpose- to select representatives who will govern and make decisions for society. The problem lies in the actual execution of these factors. The idea of a social contract between the people and the government forms the premise of why elections exist. The belief is that the consent and agreement of the people gives the government legitimacy in its exercise of political power. But in the real world, it is impossible to find such a

perfect balance. We often find voting restrictions, subpar participation, constant manipulation, rampant demagoguery and a lack of knowledge on the part of the citizens.

So elections may be considered the primary mode of securing consent and representing the will of the people in the government, but it is riddled with flaws and fails to do so. Through the course of my essay I will hence, explore these shortcomings of elections, analyzing the information according to the principles of actual representation and accountability, assessing them on a consequential level.



II. Representation – How & Why?

The fundamental nature of elections ironically counters its pragmatic goal. While franchising people is what the state should aim for, the structures which control elections focus on the political utility of people. Politicians stratify the population and give value to only those people who matter to them. In countries like the US, they've redrawn voter districts to increase the chance of favorable seats by clubbing or thinly dividing all opposing groups. Called Gerrymandering, the practice has become a staple in US politics. The creation of voter districts or constituencies is an incredibly difficult task which cannot guarantee equity to all. Because of this we see that a single vote holds more importance in certain regions than others. In many countries, this was deliberately enforced so as to give a particular advantage by region (which almost always co-relates to a natural

factor, ex-race, religion etc.). Ultimately, the individual voter isn't guaranteed value by either the institutional framework or the representatives. Making the argument for representation of will or actual consent in this case hence becomes impossible.

Inadequacies in Representation

- Representation is also flawed by factors such as incumbency advantages and the influence of money. When a representative is able to gerrymander, they are essentially setting their own exam. They don't need to actually work and have no incentive to fulfill any campaign promises. Their campaign can rely on a few power makers and win them the seat with ease. These other factors are all under the monetary aspect of this issue. Politics is slowly becoming more about the money involved than the actual governance. The Indian general elections in 2019 cost a total of 8



billion Dollars, more than half of which was spent by the incumbent. We definitely see that the incumbents often get more funds as large and powerful companies lobby them for preferential policies. This increases the influence of one demographic over the other. The actual will of the people gets lost and we lose the mandate of the people. When we allow some richer individuals to influence this more, a cycle starts which further elevates the wealthy and causes great levels of inequality. Elections at this point become pointless as they don't show any consent from the people's side.

- We can now also address wasted votes, a phenomena witnessed in every electoral system. It essentially refers to a vote which does not receive any representation in the final electoral outcome. In plurality voting systems with single member districts, the wasted votes are represented in the form of a metric called the Efficiency Gap. Developed by Nicholas Stephanopoulos and Eric McGhee in 2014, this is used to measure the degree of Gerrymandering in a district. This inadvertently also shows to us that a majority of votes are being wasted in this system by its design. If 3 parties stand for elections, the votes given to the losing 2 are lost, additionally; every vote above the bare minimum required for plurality is also essentially wasted. These wasted votes form the basis for Duverger's Law, which essentially states that single ballot SMD elections always tend to favor a 2 party system thereby limiting choice. This happens as small, new, more representative parties are disincentivised from forming in this paradigm, as they realistically can't compete and voters would prefer to not risk their precious vote. This is how their will gets completely coerced. We even see that the popular vote isn't always reflected in the result of the election.

- The Proportional representation system promotes multiparty system, but has a similar end result. It allocates seats roughly according to vote distribution, helping recover most wasted votes. But smaller parties lose representation in this system as well because there are minimum vote percentage thresholds. Without breaching these barriers the party doesn't get legislative representation and hence all those votes get wasted. This is how even Proportional Representation inherently discourages new parties. We can see that the 2 most popular electoral systems actively coerce choice, waste the votes of countless people

and discourage participation. This creates political apathy and disillusionment which creates a vicious cycle, disenfranchising more and more people.

III. Accountability & its Inadequacies

- Representatives escape reproach in most major political systems because of a systemic lack of choice. When one's electoral system doesn't encourage new competition, existing parties have no reason to actually work harder to execute the will of the people as holding them accountable is worse. People have to choose between 2 evils and they make an ideological sacrifice instead of getting empowered. We are left with a system which functions more out of obligation than idealism or aspiration.

- To add to this, the hegemony on information which the state is often able to enforce shakes up the entire electoral system. The sitting government can often brainwash, unknowingly coerce or actively push people to vote for them by controlling the mainstream media. This could look like anything from using government funds for projects and advertising them as personal victories to the harassment of political opponents and dissenters. This creates a system of "elected autocracies" which use elections to legitimize their reign and appear democratic. This semi totalitarian control allows the government to influence voters in a way that they buy into the government's agenda regardless of their preferences. This happens as targeted ads and specialized information poison your mind almost instantly and leave a long lasting thought.

- The control on information is often paired with greater censorship and a lack of meaningful discourse. This kind of a quasi-authoritarian (or actual authoritarian) rule incentivizes majoritarianism on a large scale. The government has the forced and protected mandate of the people along with a symbolic election used to give them international legitimacy. All these factors make it easier to oppress the common man, not empower him.

IV. Conclusion

John Stuart Mill once said, "The worth of a state, in the long run, is the worth of the individuals composing it". People don't see actual representation of their choices in the government but they also notice that there is no real way of getting a better government into power. We notice



this definite political vacuum but don't realize that the easiest way to fill it is to have better political participation. But bringing about positive change is extremely complex. People have realized how little their votes matter, yet the anger rages on. People are passionate about political change yet they are absolutely disinterested in politics. We see a rise of this kind of apathy as an indicator that the current model of elections does not represent the will of the people. It's become a utility oriented lottery for the upper parts of society to maintain their privilege. Changing this, according to Mill, is in the citizen's hands.

Suggestions for improving the Election Process

Let me be clear, we're not trying to replace elections. We're simply assessing their ability to reflect the will of the people and suggest ways to improve them.

- Relying more on direct votes like referendums for crucial policy decisions helps people regain political agency.
- Pairing this with strict transparency in political procedures, parties and campaign finances is very important.
- The creation of a 4th organ of the government to ensure electoral efficiency, inclusivity, representation, and accountability is important. The members of this would be chosen through a merit based system of exams and interviews. It would be totally independent from the executive and legislature but would derive authority from the judiciary.
- The role of the "Electionary" would be to act as a 3rd party in the procedure and to ensure a) fair drawing of electoral districts b) Absolute transparency and public records of all financial transactions c) Improvement of political atmosphere in the country through education, programs, direct dialogue with people and analysis of our current mistakes. This organ would be constitutionally guaranteed and would supersede the authority of just an election commission.

I believe that all these changes can help elections become more representative of the people and change the entire equation. Finally, the country can serve the people just as much as they serve the country.

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