



Why the Results of Elections Don't Express the Will of the People

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Abstract

This essay is a thought exercise on the process of elections. It aims to introduce a discussion into why elections may not be considered an absolute representation of the will of the electorate, as would be ideal in a democracy, with a broader objective of influencing discussion on how these aspects may be addressed in different democracies and systems of power.

Keywords: *Elections; Political Will; Irrationality; Voter; Propaganda; Rousseau; Information Asymmetry*

Introduction

According to Oxford Languages, an election can broadly be defined as “a formal and organised choice by a vote of a person for a political office or other position” (Oxford University Press, 2023). It is worth noting that the implications of this essay aren't restricted to the political context of government offices and also include, say, a student-led organisation picking the new captain of their team. The “will” of the people can be defined as the interests of the people based on which they have voted in an election. It is important to note that in any election, representing the true will of all the people participating in a vote is not possible in any case because there will always be a majority and a minority, and the minority's “will” will likely not be expressed as well as their counterparts' as a result of the election. There will also be abstentions. Considering this certainty, this essay will only refer to “people” as the people who are part of the succeeding majority in the election and not all the people, and judge whether or not their will is being represented.

In his work about the General Will, Rousseau argues that people can become conscious citizens and considerate of their republic's interests through their own conscience (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2023) (Britannica). He extends, therefore, that any public assembly then is also not a debate amongst leaders but a discussion of the will of the people. In other words, people can think for themselves and act rationally and so will choose the person who is best suited for a role, therefore the result of an election will also represent the will of the people. The contention here is that people will not always be able to vote for who they think is the right candidate because of both innate and external factors.

There are three primary reasons for this. First, the usage of propaganda in elections principally violates the idea of representing someone's will. Second, information asymmetry and structural inequalities prevent authentic voting. Third, our intrinsic irrationality, because of which we may not represent our true interests even if we have the ability to.

Principles of propaganda Historian Henry Adams rightfully said, "During an election campaign the air is full of speeches and vice versa." This usage of propaganda by candidates is unfair because it leads people to believe something that is not completely true and convinces them to unknowingly vote against their will. Since virtually all political candidates use propaganda in campaigning, I contend that elections do not represent the will of the people. Propaganda is, as Dr Anthony Pratkanis of USC puts it, "a manipulation designed to lead you to a simplistic conclusion rather than a carefully considered one" (The Times, 1992). By their very design, political messages are created to make one change their stance by presenting information in ways that digress from their true form but only far enough so that voters are drawn towards them. A Chinese study on political euphemism discusses how using terms like 'Operation Sunshine' for an American nuclear test is a way for politicians to protect their campaign (Zhao & Dong, 2010). Voters may not fully support nuclear technology, but "Operation Sunshine" isn't as troubling to the average person, especially an uninformed one. Reference to the true meaning of the term could've caused a change in voter's will, but the true meaning was hidden-albeit in plain sight.

A study of Chinese media found that propaganda also influences people's beliefs about other citizens' opinions on the regime. The likelihood of others protesting in turn impacted their own will to protest (Huang & Cruz, 2022). It is like Orwell states in his essay, *Politics and the English Language*: "Political language – and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists – is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind (Blair, 2011)." Alternatively, politicians also use similar wording to flip the narrative. During an interview after the USA's "invasion" of Grenada in 1983, as it was termed by journalists, President Reagan insisted on referring to it as a "rescue mission" instead (Reagan Library, 2016). Through such rhetoric, politicians can subvert voters from formulating a negative opinion on an event by referring to an event in a completely different light and effectively 'dodge' questions that may portray them negatively in any way. If political will represents what people want and propaganda deceives them into believing a certain candidate is whom they want while the truth may be different, the results of elections aren't an accurate representation of their will.

Historically, the main objection to this line of argumentation has been the moral right to freedom of communication (Miller, 2020). However, the strongest rebuttal has been by free-speech absolutists such as Alexander Meiklejohn. They argue that there should be no limitation on political speech (Meiklejohn, 1948) (European Liberties Platform, 2023) and that the truth can only be reached through a completely unrestricted exchange of views; something similar to Mill's 'marketplace of ideas' wherein the truth emerges from competing ideas (Gordon, 1997). However, the issue arises when candidates also exercise free speech absolutism, because unlike voters- who are likely to use the facility to reach the truth- they have an incentive to misuse it and embellish information to garner votes. It is to be noted that the contention here isn't that a political candidate convincing voters is principally unfounded. Rather, it is that convincing a voter using deceitful means (such as misrepresentation or falsehood) is unjust because it distorts a voter's perception of who will be a good representation of their interests and prevents the results of elections from expressing their true will.

Information Asymmetry

Asymmetric information, as posited by Nobel Laureates George Akerlof, Michael Spence and Joseph Stiglitz, broadly refers to the situation in which "agents on one side of the market have much

better information than those on the other side” (Nobel Prize, 2001). This applies to elections, wherein the lack of information due to systemic flaws can have an impact on the vote an individual chooses to give.

To vote for the perfect candidate according to their interests, the more information a voter has the more appropriate their decision will be and the more likely the election will be to represent their will. However, because of the information inequality within society (Schiller, 2013), some of the people who comprise the electorate some people have lesser access compared to others. This prevents many from picking the candidate who suits their needs best and they may end up choosing a candidate who doesn't best represent their interests. The presence of public opinion polls may exacerbate this effect, as a study has shown, since the uninformed may rely on the opinions of the public polls to decide whom to vote for (Cukierman, 1991). In both of these scenarios, an individual is unable to truly represent their interest because they're misled by the information that is available to them.

A study on the effect of anti-black propaganda on election outcomes concluded that “the media’s coverage of propaganda can have persistent effects on both our perceptions of the past and political outcomes” (Winfrey, 2022). This highlights another crucial aspect of information asymmetry in voting: access to information dissemination. Consider a situation with two candidates, Candidate A and Candidate B and one voter, Voter N. The candidate with greater access to resources such as funding and media can spread their message to a larger population while Candidate B with lesser resources is not. In this scenario, even if Candidate B represents the interests of Voter N better, he may become less likely to win the vote because he isn't able to provide Voter N with as much information about his message as Candidate A is. Therefore, Candidate A might win the election even if he doesn't best represent Voter N's interests simply because Candidate B just isn't able to create as much of a presence in Voter N's life as Candidate A. Empirical work done by Stanford researcher Katherine Casey supports this idea, suggesting that greater information nudges voters to assess individual candidates instead of simply remaining loyal and prevents the domination of local elections by certain groups (Casey, 2015), as is happening in the case of Candidate A. This means elections are more likely to represent the will of the people when people are given more information to carefully discern who is a good choice as per their interests and who isn't.

Inherent Irrationality

Rationality involves using logic to make decisions and is attributed to being able to act in self-interest. Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman said: “If individuals are rational, there is no need to protect them against their own choices.” If individuals were indeed rational, therefore, we wouldn't need an election to elect a government that regulates our behaviour. In the context of political elections, a voter's prerogative is to vote for a candidate who represents their interests best. This is important in the context of elections since we must interpret each candidate's message and thoroughly understand it in order to judge who may best reflect our interests. A Taiwanese study posited that voter rationality can be determined based on voters' consistency with their intentions (their will) and their evaluation of the candidate based on their intentions (Lee et al, 2017). Their results suggested that “voters generally aim to be diligent and to optimise their choices, even if they make less rational choices in the end.” In other words, despite being conscious of their irrationality they were not able to correct it. Therefore, elections don't always represent the true will of the people because voters can be incapable of assessing candidates with regard to their own interests, even if the judgement of their rationality is restricted to making a decision based on limited information.

Kahneman and Tversky claimed, however, that our irrationality enables us to make better choices (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). They discuss that in the real world, being overly rational can worsen our decision-making since we fail to take into account the various uncertainties of real life. Meanwhile, “heuristics” or mental shortcuts associated with instinct can help. For instance, the recognition heuristic

may cause us to opt for familiarity when choosing. In the context of elections, though, this does not help voters make a better decision at representing their will for two reasons. Firstly, a recognition heuristic may cause an inclination to vote for a familiar candidate even if they don't represent an individual's interest. Secondly, an overreliance on instincts can ingrain biases within voters (Morber, 2015) which could lead to them being drawn away from a candidate even if they meet all their interests.

Conclusion

Overall, the use of propaganda coupled with the presence and misuse of asymmetric information prevents the inherently irrational voter from always representing their best interest while voting. Candidates are able to present themselves as something they are not; pretend to satisfy the will of the person and successfully deceive them, thereby meaning that the results of the elections don't embody the will of its people. Even if Rousseau's claim about people being conscious of the republic was completely true, the will of the political candidates to win the election by any means necessary would likely outweigh an election system's ability to express the will of its voters.

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