

Do The Results Of Elections Express The Will Of People?

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I. Introduction:

Election is a centuries mode of operation, but there are different opinions on its feasibility and whether it can objectively reflect public opinion. Since the era of ancient Greece, people have carried out civic elections under the banner of democracy: every citizen of the city-state participated in the civic assembly; the generals and high finance ministers were chosen by lot; and even “ostracism” was used against those who might pose a threat to the democracy of the city-state.¹ However, only a small number of people could be counted as “citizens,” and due to the prevalence of slavery, the majority of the population of the ancient Greek city-states were working slaves, so whether it was a democratic situation needed more consideration.

Moreover, most Athenian citizens could not read and could not even write the names of the candidates. Under such circumstances, have the people really expressed or even formed their will?

During the Enlightenment period, thinkers such as John Locke put more emphasis on democracy and the procedural nature of elections. He believed that only through “scientific” and reasonable operation and management could the people truly speak out and express democracy and individualism. Locke raised the idea of “the consent of governed,” stating that it is by the citizens who decide the legitimacy of the regimes and elections. In the process of elections, it is an issue of whether the people express their wills or whether the people are forced to present their wills. Today, the question remains unresolved: are the current elections a ritualized mega-event? Did today’s election express the will of the people?

II. Election:

First, we need to define the term --- election: that is, broadly speaking, a means or act of determining leaders in any situation (including governments, schools, corporations) that applies to all groups of people. In a narrow sense or from a political perspective, an election is a formal decision-making process in which people vote together to elect candidates for a government position, and it is only available to those who meet certain criteria (e.g., citizens over the age of 18 and with political power).

We find that the distinctions in the definition or interpretation of election generate a range of discussions on this topic. From a broader perspective, to some extent, elections as a means or action in any situation cannot express the true will of the people, because in many cases people are unable to form rational ideas. For example, if the prisoners, who have not formed an accepted value system and moral standards, participate in the election, will it be good for the election or the term democracy? In most primary schools in China, class leaders, such as the monitors, are elected, and students mechanically raise their hands to cast their votes. They acquiesce in the fact of electing class leaders but not consider about the significance of the existence of the class leaders or what is the effect of the loss of its existence. This is similar to the ancient mythology described in James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*,ⁱⁱ in which people do not pay attention to the process and essence of an action, but to a certain form, believing that only by following the prescribed procedures to complete the corresponding task can they understand the true meaning of “democracy.” How is this situation fundamentally different from the event of the illiterate ancient Athenians voting for the leaders thousands of years ago? As the act of election is gradually integrated into people’s daily lives, it seems to have become more of a ritualized activity. Particularly, no one cares about the essence of election, and people accept their existence without even questioning the meaning and purpose of elections. In this sense, elections do not express the will of the people; on the contrary, the will of the people is forcibly formed in the process of elections, as if by brainwashing.

On the contrary, if the term election is described in the case of political, part of the people’s wills can be represented. In an ideal world, assuming that all people are capable of independent thinking and hold a just value, even citizens with vastly different political ideas can contribute to the diversity of elections. However, obviously, the reality is different, and we cannot guarantee that everyone has the ability to make independent judgments or not be disturbed by the external factors. In the next three sections the author will discuss the political elections and the expression of the will of the people.

III. The Will of People:

The will of people is a complicated concept. What is the true will of the people? The author divides the concept of will into two branches: “passive will,” that is, the will that people are forced to form, usually under invisible or visible oppression. “Passive will” is the indoctrination from the top (status or society) to the bottom that can be connected to the anthropological concept of “grand tradition.”ⁱⁱⁱ On the contrary, “active will” refers to the ideas spontaneously formed by the people after careful consideration, and it is the true will related to the life of the people. “Active will” is the indoctrination from the bottom to the top that can be connected to the concept of “little tradition”^{iv} in anthropology.

IV. Passive Will:

Throughout the world, even in one-party or authoritarian states, the result of elections can express the “passive will” of the people. Elections today tend to be centralized, and government positions are often held by a small number of elites. For example, the politics of the United States is dominated by the Democratic Party and the Republican Party, and in most cases, minority parties and independents have no decision-making power and leadership in politics. While people possess diversified ideas on politics, or to say various “active will,” objectively, they cannot successfully realize the representation of their will because of the concentration of power, or the oligarchy. People’s will is manufactured by the political machines, in particular, the political propagandas, whether in the means of social media or election speeches. In this case, the citizens are forced to form “passive will,” and this particular “will” is effectively represented.

The “passive will” of the citizens could also be formed as the result of the potential immeasurable nature of representation. Representation, and especially democracy, is incalculable, and it is often oversimplified to use the number of electorates to measure the level and extent of democracy. How can we compare the extent of democracy between France and Germany by their elections? Or how can we even compare the representational democracy in 2023 Korea and 2013 Korea? Is the current Korea more democratic than 10 years ago? These are open-ended questions with multiple perspectives to consider but not merely with the scale of electorates and the citizens’ nominal degree of participation. When politicians overemphasize the democratic development of the state, they are trying to exaggerate their political achievements and guide, interfere, and even manipulate people’s mind to impose the “passive will.” To be specific, the political leaders would then lead propagandas and advocate on the social media to mislead people to have a sense that their nation is becoming more and more “democratic,” forcing the formation of “passive will” and reinforcing their control on the political.

Even in a one-party state, the “passive will” of the people can be effectively displayed. Take the current electoral system in China for example: The People’s Congress selects party members from lower-level bodies to represent the citizens’ wills and further elect the chairman, Standing Committee, and other top party officials in the central Committee. For China, with a population of 1.4 billion, this is perhaps the most efficient and diverse electoral system. Through the complexity of the electoral process, part of the will of the people can be represented, because people gradually have the opportunity to express their voice. People possess a kind of “passive will,” and this “passive will” is reflected in the official media’s external propaganda and speech restrictions and filtering, so that more Chinese people have a kind of hope and recognition of the current leaders. After the formation of the “passive will,” it is widely believed that there is no better alternative to the current leader. Under one-party dictatorship, although the voice of the people is represented, most people still have the opportunity to express their views, especially passively.

V. Active Will:

The “active will” is an ideological influence from the bottom to the top generated by people’s in-depth research on political. The author believes that the results of elections generally cannot express the “active will” of all people. Joseph Schumpeter often claimed the absence of electorates’ “effective volition,”^v indicating that because of the electorates’ apathy/ignorance, the difference between electoral decisions and legislative decisions, citizens who are sensible in the private spheres may not act rational or active enough to make decisions for the states.

Now, we assume that the “effective volition” or “active will” exist for most citizens. In general, “active will” is formed by the independent thinking of individual voters, and it also affects the political decision-makers. We need to distinguish between individual and group value differences: individuals, or voters, have a variety of ways of thinking that lead to different value judgments and decisions. However, individual interests may not always represent the ultimate group interests: Jeremy Bentham put forward utilitarianism, which emphasizes the pursuit of the maximum happiness of the group without considering the impact of the process on the result, but in this process, the rights and interests of many voters will be ignored or even compromised. For example, in the 2020 election in the United States, Trump received nearly 47% of the votes but lost the election, and 47% of the national voters’ voices were not heard, but they must accept the fact that Joe Biden was elected

president and must face the policy and philosophy of the future Democratic Party. Accordingly, even if the citizens could form their unique “active will,” these wills would be replaced by the “passivewill.”

VI. Conclusion:

In conclusion, the author believes that the election results in a broad sense do not fully express the will of the people, while the election results in a narrow sense or political sense can be divided into the concept of “passive will” and “active will” of the people. The result of the election can represent the “passive will” of the people, but it is difficult to represent the “active will” of distinctive citizens. Politics works most efficiently when there is a balance between the passive and active will. In most cases, the will of the people is the product but not the motive power of the political process.

If the “active will” of the people can be fully adopted and expressed, then the society will be fully democratic. However, will the will of people or absolute democracy necessarily increase the productivity of the society and the happiness of the people? The author believes this issue is open to further discussion: if the people aspire to a lazy state of life and this is fully adopted, then the society will not be in a good shape but rather paralyzed.