

On the Limitations of Electoral Systems in Expressing the Will of the People

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Abstract: This paper examines the topic of the extent to which elections reflect the will of the people, a crucial precondition for free and fair elections, cornerstones of a country's democratic system. This study analyzes free will from two perspectives—the personal and social—identifying education, critical thinking, and the ability to access reliable information as necessary conditions for free will. Conducting a historical-based analysis, this work assesses the mechanisms through which dictators in authoritarian regimes use the role of the 'election' as a guise for masking totalitarian oppression. Next, it addresses the more subtle but equally perilous danger of demagogic leaders who take advantage of voter fears and prejudices to pretend to represent the citizens' will. Lastly, the paper examines how various external factors, even in the framework of a perceived democratic electoral system, can usurp the people's power. Namely, the nature of big data and targeted political advertising with predictive algorithms, along with disenfranchisement of marginalized groups and inherent flaws in seemingly democratic electoral systems—including the Electoral College or Israel's fragmented parliamentary system—call into question the strength of the people's will. The paper then argues that mitigating the flaws that subvert the people's will necessitates large-scale reforms on a social and institutional level.

Keywords: free will, elections, demagoguery, social media, and disenfranchisement

1. Introduction

The recent 2024 presidential election in the United States has ignited newfound debate over the concept of free will in elections. Political historian Allan Lichtman, author of the famed "13 Keys to the White House" model to predicting the victor to the White House, has had his assumption of a rational, pragmatic electorate, unaffected by external factors such as campaign messaging and social media, called into question [1]. This idea of an electorate that thinks rationally in favor of its own interests has long permeated through political science literature. Yale political scientist Robert Dahl, for instance, posits in his hallmark work "On Democracy" that an ideal democratic system, elections are means through which the people express their desires—presumably with adequate access to reliable information [2]. However, recent events, such as the 2024 US presidential election, perhaps call into question this idea of a rational and pragmatic electorate, and thus, the extent through which people exercise their free will in elections. Given these newfound developments, this paper seeks to not only assess the nature of free will in elections through historical trends, but also through looking at flaws in seemingly democratic electoral systems in the modern day, like the one in the US.

Ultimately, the work seeks to identify the factors which weaken the credibility and representativeness of an electoral process, contending that elections are unable to fully represent the will of the people.

The paper first examines this topic by describing the relationship between free will and electoral choice. The work examines the concept of free will from both personal and social dimensions. The elections of authoritarian regimes are a cover for the absence of true democracy, but even more pressing, demagogic leaders have had the opportunities to capitalize on fear and prejudice within the electorate for their political gain.

The last part of the study concerns itself with social media propaganda bolstered by big data algorithms, as well as disenfranchisement of historically marginalized groups such as women and African Americans, before moving onto a discussion of the underlying faults within apparently democratic systems, like skewed representation in the American Electoral College and the factionalism within Israel's parliamentary system. In not offering a blanket viewpoint on the strength of elections, this paper reveals the difficulty in finding practical solutions to these challenges, emphasizing that resolving the suppression of people's will requires fundamental reforms in the electoral systems.

2. Literature Review

The connection between elections and free will is a topic of interest that has spanned the intersection of various fields such as sociology, political science, and philosophy. Specifically, Robert Dahl stresses the highly participatory nature as a defining characteristic of a democratic system [2]. As Dahl theorizes, elections are a mechanism through which citizens can indicate their approval (or disapproval) of a government and hold their elected representatives accountable, premised on an adequate opportunity for 'enlightened understanding' (i.e. to understand policy proposals). At the same time, Dahl recognizes that the extent of such participation is controlled by various factors like socioeconomic disparities or special interests that thwart the expression of democratic ideals at the polls [2].

These preconditions that Dahl sets out for a democratic electoral system, however, completely falter when examining authoritarian systems—where elections are entirely rendered meaningless. Experts like and have extensively research authoritarian regimes' relationship with electoral systems [3, 4]. These authors demonstrate that autocratic regimes employ various manipulative tactics, including state control demonstrate that autocratic regimes employ various manipulative tactics, including state control of a legitimate democracy on an institutional level as a guarantee to legitimize their grip on power.

Even of media, voter coercion through an open ballot (as opposed to a process by secrecy), and even rigging vote tabulations. These seemingly "democratic" tools, therefore, function not as a characteristic in seemingly democratic electoral systems, demagogues can subtly work their way through the system to subvert the will of the people through deceptive rhetoric. Because of how populists exploit people's fears and biases at the expense of marginalized groups and democratic institutions, the very presence of demagogues itself hampers the free will of the people [5, 6]. Furthermore, in the 21st century, a specific means to transmit disinformation has emerged: social media. Examining the impact of fake news and political promos designed to elicit specific responses, and Nathaniel Persily and Yochai Benkler, et al. view these acts as antithetical to democracy and call of stricter regulations such as light plus rules to better ensure the democratic potential of elections [7, 8]. Moreover, Wei, et al. argue that the rapid development of artificial intelligence technologies has only exacerbated the disinformation crisis by making "false information dissemination simpler and quicker" [9]. The misinformation crisis is not anything new, the authors argue, but the newcoming technology of AI has cast a new light on the issue. With these rapid developments of technology in

mind, this paper argues that specific regulatory mechanisms are necessary to prevent further damage on electoral integrity.

Lastly, this paper conducts a thorough analysis of voter suppression. Prominent scholars like Carol Anderson and Ari Berman have extensively discussed this issue, emphasizing that the exclusion of specific groups calls into question the “representativeness” of the electorate [10, 11]. This type of systematic exclusion can occur through direct but also indirect means, including burdensome voter ID laws, closure of polling stations, and even earlier in American history, the use of competency tests for voters to exclude specific racial demographics.

Overall, this paper will present a literature review that calls to attention the interconnected factors that link elections and the notion of popular will. In addition to providing insights into the scholarly debate on this topic, this paper seeks to set forth some policy recommendations to better ensure that elections act as a means to express the people’s will without external interference.

3. The Factors Undermining the Will of the People

3.1. Elections as an Illusion for Legitimacy in Authoritarian Systems

The issue of elections in authoritarian countries has come up much in literature. For an election to truly hold meaning within the context of democratic metrics, it must satisfy the two conditions of being held freely and fairly. Unfortunately, these ‘elections’ in authoritarian countries fail to meet these basic litmus tests because they lack genuine choice over candidates, generally handpicked by the ruling party or leader. In countries like North Korea or Turkmenistan, the mere idea of elections is a joke. Participation is rendered meaningless since voters exercise their vote with an already known outcome. In these systems, therefore, the elections serve merely to distract from the reality of authoritarian power and provide the citizens with a feeling of legitimacy of the role of the dictatorship [4].

Even in more competitive authoritarian systems that may, in certain circumstances, satisfy the conditions of a free election, there is no room for equal participation of both the supporting party and the opposition. The ruling party in countries like Russia and Venezuela frequently use strategies like media control and manipulation of vote totals to disrupt the fairness of elections. While opposition participation may be permitted to give an appearance of a more democratic systems, the substantial impediments such candidates encounter makes any opposition practically meaningless. Recently, in Venezuela, for instance, the regime of Nicolas Maduro, barred the popular opposition Maria Corina Machado based on questionable evidence for having participated in a subversive plot against the Venezuelan state with the acting President Juan Guaidó during the Venezuelan presidential crisis. Even when the opposition managed to spearhead another candidate, the more moderate format diplomat Edmundo Gonzalez, international observers and poll watchers reported numerous irregularities and inconsistencies with vote tabulation sheets printed at polling stations, seriously calling into question whether every citizen’s vote was counted equally (and thus whether the election was fair) [12]. The opposition party poll watchers recorded and uploaded actas verification sheets from the polling results of each station and uploaded them to a website. An independent forensic analysis conducted by Mebane of the University of Michigan has not detected any statistically significant probability that the opposition manipulated this data, suggesting the veracity of this data that indicates inconsistencies in Venezuela’s electoral process [12]. This example, and others, demonstrates how either a lack of candidate choice or stifling of equal voter participation both make elections merely a ritualistic exercise in authoritarian regimes [4].

3.2. Impact of Demagoguery on Voters' Free Will

The threat of demagogic leaders on free will in electoral systems does not appear surface-level, but evidently appears upon a deeper examination of their rhetoric. Demagoguery fundamentally involves on taking advantage of individuals' fears and prejudices—oftentimes scapegoating minority groups and undermining what they claim to be “establishment” democratic institutions. One can see such tactics with Adolf Hitler's tropes of Jewish people, or anti-foreign and anti-immigrant sentiments exhibited by Donald Trump in the United States or Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil more recently. In appealing to voters' emotional instincts as opposed to their rational or pragmatic senses, these demagogues then successfully manipulate the electorate's vote, and in turn, kill the free will of the people.

The most visible and dangerous form of demagoguery occurs in the form of silencing the opposition or making them appear illegitimate in the public eye. In the case of the 2020 presidential elections in the United States, for instance, Donald Trump repeatedly claimed without evidence that there had been widespread fraud in the 2020 elections and advanced such claims in courts. This disinformation, combined with the nature of social media algorithms (see 3.3), led to situation of widespread erosion of trust in democracy where a certain half of a nation lived in an alternative reality [8]. Brazil has witnessed a similar issue in recent years: former President Jair Bolsonaro consistently attacked the media, judicial system, and even suggested desire to contest electoral outcome [13]. By reducing trust in institutions, demagogic leaders create the illusion of fighting against an establishment system and simultaneously engineer an environment where they can easily manipulate voters.

The main purpose of demagoguery is to pit different ethnic groups against each other through appealing to individual interests, often economic-related. Given that the demagogues' goal is to manufacture division, social media has also become a breeding ground for demagoguery [14]. As a recent study by Palsma notes, the “simplicity, impulsivity, and incivility” of a social media environments like Twitter creates an environment where demagogues can easily distort voter intentions. These environments, characterized, by convenience and simplicity, often have shorter and quicker ways of disseminating information compared to traditional media. Such channels of information flow---often without proper contextualization---can lead to misleading voter conclusions and thus affect voter behavior and the voter's will [14]. The following section provides a more detailed explanation of the underlying dynamics of social media algorithms in influencing electoral outcomes.

3.3. The Role of Disinformation in Undermining Electoral Integrity

Given the above discussion of attempts to undermine electoral integrity, it is important to examine social media's role in doing so. Two prominent examples of social media's role of undermining confidence in electoral results are the 2016 US Presidential election and the UK Brexit Referendum in 2016. In both instances, false information came freely with targeted political ads that intended to sway public opinion, and consequently, vote totals [7]. Through use of big data plus advanced algorithms, disinformation campaigns have been able to target individualized messages at specific voters, blurring reality with fiction for the electorate.

Disinformation takes away Dahl's crucial precondition for democracy, understanding, by stripping voters the opportunity to gather reliable information that would help them make sound decisions. As false or misleading information continues to flow towards voters, voters begin to lose trust in mainstream media, as evidenced by the rise of individual influencers and podcasters in the 2024 election. Turning into alternative sources of information continues to feed into a perpetual cycle of

confirmation bias, where voters easily fall victim to conspiracy theories and extremist views, thus leading to unreliable election outcomes that do not reflect the best interests of the electorate [15].

Tackling the issue of disinformation is no easy task, and various legislative proposals have emerged in favor of restricting fake news and utilizing algorithms to deprioritize inflammatory or misleading rhetoric. The substance of and intentions behind such regulations are generally sound, but such blanket restrictions have encountered opposition from legal experts and free speech and free enterprise advocates, however. In light of these challenges, therefore, the best framework for regulation is not strictly a legislative one but rather an environment of “co-regulation”—where the government and private sector innovators work in tandem, each bringing their respective background and insights, to come up with the best solutions to combat disinformation [16].

3.4. Voter Suppression and Disenfranchisement

Disenfranchisement, along the lines of income, race, and gender, has been a major issue that has plagued supposedly democratic systems. In the United States, for instance, the government has historically disallowed African Americans from voting through slavery, as well as later in the Jim Crow era through more indirect means such as poll taxes, literacy tests, and voter ID laws—requirements practically impossible for these groups of people to fulfill and thus vote [11].

Examining wider trends, one finds that voter suppression is a global phenomenon. In Brazil, for instance, indigenous communities, along with other marginalized groups, often face barriers to political participation—namely, voter intimidation or an unequal access to polling stations and locations [11]. Other democracies similarly suffer from a lack of equal opportunity for voter participation. In India, for example, often to be considered the world’s largest democracy, millions of voters have been excluded from registration due to bureaucratic flaws in the process or improper paperwork. This exclusion has had a disproportionate impact on minority groups and called into question India’s designation as a democracy [17]. When a country hinders equal democratic participation, the fairness of an election—as in being accurately reflective of the electorate—is called into question, and the people’s will as a whole becomes compromised.

3.5. The Inherent Flaws of Electoral Systems

In addition to systemic bias through voter suppression, inherent flaws situated within electoral systems can also hinder the will of the people—even if there is no intentional attempt to manipulate or suppress the vote. A prime example of such a flaw is the Electoral College system in the United States, which has been widely criticized for not accurately reflect the majority will of the population. The system exhibits blatant examples of skewed representation, particularly with its disproportionate emphasis on swing states due to its winner-takes-all system or the presence of less obvious pitfalls like faithless electors. Such issues have led critics to doubt the extent to which the Electoral College reflects the will of American citizens [18].

On the other hand, the fragmented nature of parliamentary systems can also be a problem in reflecting the will of the people. Such governmental systems allocate seats for political parties in proportion to their popular support, causing a disproportionate influence of fringe, extremist factions since broad-based, moderate coalitions are often difficult to form [19]. These extremist factions result in political instability and a government that cannot reliably stay in power to carry out its mandate from the people in the elections, thus calling into question Dahl’s condition that elections are a mechanism through which people express their desire for policies or interests to be implemented [2]. In other situations, electoral rules can systematically privilege particular groups, thus reinforcing patterns of political marginalization. Though electoral results may intend to reflect the people’s will in apparently democratic nations, structural flaws in electoral systems prevent the people’s will from

being fully realized. Unfortunately, certain aspects of voter suppression are impossible to mitigate, given the inherent power at the hands of the arbiter of elections (i.e. often an electoral board or commission). Combating voter suppression, therefore, requires diligent efforts from outside, independent groups and the judicial system to ensure fair elections.

4. Conclusion

This paper has explored the relationship between elections and the people's will, concluding that elections, even those in democratic systems, more often than not fail to reflect the majority will. Through the examination of the illusion of choice in authoritarian systems, demagogic rhetoric, disinformation, and inherent electoral flaws, the study finds these factors prevent a truly free and fair election based on Dahl's principles in his definition of a democracy. Though elections have been a staple of democratic societies, this paper reveals that they are a necessary but not sufficient condition for representation of the people's will. Ensuring the representation of the electorate is a difficult task that requires more than small-scale changes but rather institution-wide reforms—a topic that needs additional study by lawmakers and political scientist's alike overtime. In general, this paper recommends amending electoral laws to ensure proportionality in representation, reasonable regulations on technological platforms to ensure credible dissemination of information to allow voters to make informed decisions, and strengthening voter rights protections. The role of the government, therefore, becomes not to excessively interfere with the electoral process, but rather to strengthen rudimentary safeguards to better ensure that electoral outcomes are free and fair and have the public's trust.

Thus, these findings extend to not only democracy but also the realm of politics as well. The conclusions emphasize the importance of constant vigilance for flaws—internal and external to electorate systems; even in democratic societies like the United States, the population cannot take the vote for granted. Only directly pinpointing and then confronting these challenges with appropriate legislation targeting the aforementioned areas will be able to produce elections that can truly reflect the people's will. In calling for a more nuanced understanding, this paper cautions against leaning excessively onto solely government-led initiatives for regulation due to inherent limitations from the power dynamics of regulatory agencies, and instead calls for more research into collaborative approaches that involve all stakeholders in the electoral process—to strive towards elections that better reflect the will of the people. Make the future research directions specified clearly.

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