

Electoral Democracy: The Manifestation of Collective Will and Deliberation

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Abstract: This article examines the conditions under which elections can genuinely express the 'will of the people.' It argues that the establishment of a shared community and the engagement in genuine deliberation are fundamental to achieving this. Drawing on the philosophical concept of 'general will' as presented by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the article posits that a democratic society must first and foremost establish an effective social contract. This contract serves as a crucial mediator between conflicting individual desires, fostering harmony and collective wills. Furthermore, the article also notes that the establishment of a social contract is not a one-time event but rather, an ongoing process. It emphasizes the need for this contract to be consistently renewed and reevaluated through thoughtful deliberations. The article analyzes various election processes, highlighting the failures and successes of different countries. It underscores how different approaches to elections can either facilitate or hinder the formation of a representative general will. It finally concludes that elections, when conducted under the proper conditions of deliberation and a constantly evolving social contract, can indeed serve as authentic expressions of the will of the people.

Keywords: General will, Sovereign, Deliberation, Democracy, Election

1. Introduction

According to Winston Churchill, democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others [1]. The election is broadly viewed as a critical mechanism through which public accountability and legitimacy are upheld in a democracy. However, under certain circumstances, the results of elections alone can express none or even the opposite of the people's will. For instance, does a nearly unanimous vote for a student leader in the school's executive council reflect the students' preference for his leadership, or does it suggest that the election process may sway individuals towards a predetermined outcome? This article argues that two conditions must be met for the elections to express the people's will. First, people must acknowledge that they are "a people" and agree to a shared community that allows them to enforce their people's will. Second, they must engage in genuine deliberation to create an uncoerced and meaningful will that creates tangible change.

2. 'Will of People': A Philosophical Understanding

The first step is to understand the term 'will of people.' Philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau developed the foundation of the will of the people, or the "general will," in "The Social Contract."

The first term to define is “will.” Merriam-Webster defines a will as a “desire” [2]. For instance, every individual desires necessities such as food and water. Often, these private or “particular” will clash with each other. One person's wish to eat food clashes with another person’s wish to eat when there is limited food. In times before human civilization, people resolved these clashing wills through violence. This state of human society was named “the state of nature” by Rousseau. He argues the only guaranteed phenomenon in the state of nature is whoever has the most force controls others. [3]

Humans in modern society neither live in the state of nature nor operate under the rights of the strongest. How do people living in societies mediate conflicting wills? Firstly, there must be a society, and people within the society must agree to be in the society. Rousseau questions: “If there were no prior agreement, what would give the minority any obligation to submit to the choice of the majority?” [3] Rousseau argues that the people must believe that they are part of a unified society. There must be a social contract between individuals to prevent the strongest from dominating the rest through violence and impose their particular will on others. This social contract also means the strongest no longer need to live in fear of the minority using violence against them. Thus, the agreement of the social contract is necessary to “defend[ing] and protect[ing] each associate person and goods...” to allow individuals to pursue their wills. [3] Note that this social contract is a generalized will that all individuals agree to. Rousseau argues that the general will “looks only to the common interest” and is obtained by “remov[ing] from these same wills the pluses and minuses that cancel one another...” [3].

3. The Formation of ‘A People’ and the Role of a Sovereign

Thus, how does a general apply to a people, and what are the necessary conditions for forming “the people?” A “sovereign,” the perfect representation of the public will, is constructed to express and enforce the people's will. Rousseau claims two conditions exist in forming the social contract between individuals and the sovereign. Firstly, the sovereign must ensure the existence of itself to prioritize the general will over any will. Insofar as the sovereign commits an act that favors a particular will, the public will disappear, and the sovereign will destroy itself. Second, the individual, a citizen, must accept the sovereign's moral authority. Individuals pose the most significant threat to the existence of the sovereign’s general will because they can attempt to overthrow the sovereign through violence. Thus, the state must force the people to accept the sovereign’s general will. In short, for “a people” to be indeed considered “a people,” it needs to include reciprocal obligations between the sovereign and its people [3].

Nigeria’s failed elections show the importance of the sovereign. Nigeria’s elections have suffered from “violence, voter fraud, intimidation, manipulation” due to violent uprisings that cause societal breakdown. The root cause of the violence is the fundamental belief that one group of Nigerian citizens is not part of the Nigerian “people.” Nigerians could not form a social contract and were thus unable to create a sovereign powerful enough to prevent particular wills from overwhelming the general will [4]. The sovereign of Nigeria failed to ensure its existence due to the manipulation and intimidation of its people, and the history of colonialism and imperial power further entrenched the country into divides. Comparatively, Sweden’s elections demonstrate the effectiveness of elections when a “people” is formed. A study of the Swedish elections shows a direct relationship between trust in the government and the willingness of citizens to cast their votes [5]. When more people believe in the social contract, the stronger the sovereign becomes, thus enforcing the general will.

4. Deliberation in Constructing General Will

The general will can be constructed after “a people” is formed, and it must undergo a process that cancels out conflicting particular wills and allows people to understand other people’s wills. This

process is known as deliberation. The deliberation process could occur in different ways, such as journalism, debates, online discourse, and elections. Elections are “the method used to calculate the number of elected positions in government that individuals and parties are awarded after.” [6] Elections tally votes and reflect the votes in politicians or policies.

Why is the deliberation process necessary? Citizens cannot form an agreement with others in society if they do not know what other people’s wills are without deliberation. William Eveland Jr. at the Ohio State University School of Communication outlines three facets of deliberation’s importance. Firstly, citizens gain information when others who read different sources of information present them in the discussion. This is important because people can better judge the candidate, they think will fulfill the general will. Secondly, citizens are incentivized to conduct “anticipatory elaboration,” or more profound research, because they want to affirm or reject certain beliefs through credible information [7].

On the other hand, the lack of diverse information and research equates to fake information. Fake information misdirects individuals to vote in a manner that fulfills a particular will. Thus, phony information indicates the level of informational warfare against the sovereign and whether the deliberation process is functional. Other than counterfeit information, Eveland suggests that people’s beliefs could be swayed during political discourse. By becoming more politically literate, citizens could believe different particular wills under the influence of others [7]. Insofar as this influence is not coercive, changing the particular will is beneficial to represent the people’s will because the general will be up to date.

In addition, echo chambers are created when people are not exposed to other people’s beliefs and particular wills. An echo chamber is a ‘bounded, enclosed media space that has the potential to both magnify the messages delivered within it and insulate them from rebuttal’ [8]. Echo chambers are problematic because they reinforce people’s beliefs even though the information could be inaccurate. Furthermore, echo chambers destroy the purpose of deliberation as individuals are not exposed to opposing particular wills, making the cancellation process impossible. Therefore, echo chambers also indicate the failure of deliberation in an election. In summary, deliberation is important because it allows others to agree to the social contract and allows others to interpret an individual’s particular will.

5. Constant Evolution

Given that deliberation is vital to the formation of the general will, it is essential to note that “the people” change over time due to different circumstances. Thus, a single election is insufficient to represent the will of the people. Deliberation must exist constantly for the will to be formed. For example, the social contract between the founding fathers of the United States and constituents at the time is entirely different from the contract between the current president and citizens. The Second Amendment right to bear arms was written in a different context of society. The “arms” at the founding of the nation were muskets and not as dangerous as the modern machine guns.

Furthermore, America had a more significant necessity for guns to defend their borders against Native Americans and other nations. Given the different contexts of the time, the agreement that people have the right to own guns needs to be updated when society changes. Hence citizens in the United States are now restricted from owning certain firearms. There must be a renewal of the contract to ensure not only that the general will is consistent with the particular wills, but also new particular wills are included in the general will. Thus, to examine the process of elections as a form of “deliberation,” we must analyze the cycle and system of elections to determine whether elections express the will of the people.

6. Election as a Cycle of Deliberation

How do cycles of elections facilitate deliberation? A study by Stromback and Johansson finds a significant increase in political interest and news consumption during election campaigns and election season. [9] As discussed, the general will be determined by canceling conflicting particular wills. Citizens participate in elections because they want to include themselves in the deliberation process to include their specific wills in the general will. The separate wills of individuals are voted on through elections, creating discourse and policy changes, which in turn leads to more need for shift and elections. Through this continual cycle of deliberation, voting, and elimination of particular wills, the conflicting particular wills are canceled out, eventually leading to a general will.

For example, Perth, the capital city of Western Australia, implemented the “Dialogue with the City” program, which made it “the largest deliberative forum in the southern hemisphere and a case study in deliberative democracy.” This program was used for discussing city planning policies. Participant feedback showed that citizens were inclined to change their “initial cynicism about the political agenda.” Analysis by Hartz-Karp states [10]:

“They [the citizens] expressed surprise at the extent of common ground that had been forged, hope that politicians could be trusted to listen and respond to the people, and delight with the goodwill of fellow participants to engage in positive dialogue.”

Furthermore, data shows that 42% of the attendees believed that they had broadened their perspectives, and 97% of the participants believed the deliberations were valuable and were willing to attend again. This case study demonstrates how deliberation during times of voting allows citizens to be heard and, therefore, input their particular wills within the general will. In short, citizens have the incentive to participate in the electoral deliberation process due to their interest in their particular wills to be represented in the general will through the continual deliberation process.

Conversely, when elections are unable to allow deliberation, the result of elections tends to lead to the failure of the sovereign. Take Russia’s elections, for instance. Since 1998, Russia’s elections have been plagued with election fraud and voter coercion. The Kremlin has a firm grasp over the ballot system that allows it to falsify ballots. Furthermore, the Kremlin has strong ties with oligarchs that commit bribery that skew election results. Some officials were “awarded” over 10 million votes by the Kremlin. The failure of Russia’s elections led to the victory of Boris Yeltsin in 1996, who had only single-digit approval ratings, a clear sign of how the people’s wills were not expressed. [11].

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the will of the people, as Rousseau puts it, is the “constrained deliberate choice of the people.” There must be a social contract between individuals to compromise their particular wills and trust the sovereign; meanwhile, the sovereign must ensure its survival. Then, a general will can then be formed through a deliberation process. The cycle of elections demonstrates that it is a successful form of deliberation. Lastly, indicators such as echo chambers and fake information can be used to determine whether an election is failing. Therefore, elections do express the will of the people, only under the conditions that allow “a people” and its “wills” to be constructed through a deliberation process.

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