

# *Do the Results of Elections Express the Will of the People?*

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**Abstract:** This study explores the importance of elections in expressing the people's will in governance.. Tracing the historical evolution of democratic systems, with particular emphasis on the seminal contributions of Cleisthenes in ancient Athens, the research unravels the roots of this fundamental democratic practice. While acknowledging concerns like elections amplifying divisions and the influence of money and media, the study argues elections remain an effective method for representing public will. To substantiate this assertion, the study draws comparisons with alternative governance models, such as monarchies and dictatorships, underscoring the inherent strengths of electoral processes, notably accountability and responsibility. The study also discusses various electoral systems, including Proportional Representation, addressing their advantages and drawbacks, underscoring the need to tackle issues like voter interference and unequal representation to enhance electoral integrity in contemporary democracies. Through a comprehensive analysis of electoral systems and associated challenges, this study advocates for ongoing reforms and strategic measures to fortify electoral processes, fostering a more robust and representative democratic landscape.

**Keywords:** elections, electoral system, people's will, effective elections, proportional representation

## **1. Introduction**

Cleisthenes, an Athenian statesman, revolutionized politics in 507 BCE by bringing forth the first rendition of democracy within ancient Athens [1]. For perhaps the first time, ordinary citizens were empowered with the right and responsibility to participate in their city-state's governance.

As societal complexity and scale increased, the demand for systems to select representatives and maintain social order intensified. By facilitating peaceful power transfers, promoting responsive governance, and spurring citizen political participation, elections have become vital components of modern representative democracies, such as federal republicanism in the U.S. among others. Nevertheless, critics argue that elections can exacerbate societal divisions, as competing political parties often prioritize catering to their respective bases over reaching mutual compromises, thereby demonstrating tendencies like favoring their own group at the expense of others. Additionally, the sway of money and media can generate unequal playing fields, potentially skewing outcomes towards well-funded candidates and established parties as special interest groups often have more financial power compared to the average individual.

This study contends that despite imperfections and inefficiencies that arise from electoral systems,

monetary and media influences, and voter manipulation, elections remain the best method for expressing the will of the people.

## 2. Democracy: A Superior Alternative to Monarchies and Dictatorships

The democratic election process is often hailed as the key mechanism for expressing the will of the people because elected officials are obligated to be responsible for (act on the interest and intentions of the people) and accountable to (possibility of receiving or losing power based on public evaluation) their constituents. To highlight the importance and uniqueness of these two obligations in upholding the will of the people in governance, we must discuss their absence in monarchies and dictatorships.

Monarchies naturally give power to a royal family, with leadership passing through inheritance, not public elections. Queen Victoria's six-decade reign in the UK exemplifies this. Despite progressive reforms during her time, her rule reflected her personal vision more than the public will, often aligning with aristocratic desires over the diverse will of the people. Her lack of direct public accountability was evident during the mid-19th century Irish Potato Famine when critics argue her administration largely overlooked the suffering Irish [2]. However, monarchs aren't entirely immune to their actions' consequences. For example, Charles I of England, whose rule saw conflict with Parliament, incited the English Civil War and ultimately met his demise [3]. This case clearly demonstrates that even monarchs can face severe repercussions if their actions clash with public sentiment or national interests.

Nevertheless, while fear of revolution may act as a form of check on a monarch's power, it doesn't match the efficacy and predictability of constitutional checks and balances in a democracy. Revolutions entail uncertain outcomes, societal chaos, and significant costs, deterring potential revolutionaries and not necessarily leading to improved governance. Conversely, democracies ensure accountability through systematic checks and balances—periodic elections, an independent judiciary, a free press, and separation of powers [4]. These mechanisms provide clearer, more foreseeable outcomes and can be invoked with far less risk and disruption.

In contrast, dictatorships centralize power in an individual or a chosen few, typically maintained through force and the silencing of opposition. This power accumulation frequently leads to a leadership that is detached from the needs and desires (the will) of the populace. A case in point is Saddam Hussein's reign in Iraq, which marked by human rights violations and a combative foreign policy [5]. More specifically, in the late 1980s Al-Anfal Campaign, his administration implemented a sequence of genocidal measures targeting the Kurdish community, indicating a disregard for fundamental human rights and a dereliction of duty towards a significant portion of their own population [6]. Moreover, public opinion held no sway and could exert no influence on decision-making procedures, as any opposition to the regime leader's will was met with violent intimidation and punishment, highlighting how the will of the people can be overlooked in such a system [7]. The lack of electoral consequences for his actions shows the absence of the crucial accountability component.

Elections present a distinct alternative to monarchies and dictatorships by enabling individuals to express their choices, select their delegates, and exert a certain level of impact on the workings of the state. Consider the Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who campaigned on and ultimately fulfilled his promises to address environmental concerns by implementing a national pricing plan on carbon pollution in 2018 [8]. His decisions and policies thus reflected the desires of his electorate. While elected officials may not always deliver on their pledges, they still operate within a system that harbors the possibility of change through subsequent elections. Trudeau's actions are also subject to democratic accountability. In the 2019 election, due to several factors, including the scandals that tarnished Trudeau's public image, heavy opposition to Trudeau's environmental policy from certain provinces that rely on oil and gas industries, and lack of follow through on electoral reform, Trudeau's

party lost the majority in Parliament, a clear indicator of public dissatisfaction with aspects of his leadership and its ability to influence the political power of government officials [9].

The twin dynamic of responsibility and accountability enables peaceful transitions of power and aligns the democratic system more closely with the public will, a distinguishing feature glaringly absent in monarchies and dictatorships. The election process allows citizens to express their will and influence governance, ensuring the effectiveness of this system over its alternatives.

### 3. Not All Elections Are Equal

The specific form of an election-based system plays a crucial role in reflecting public will. Three of the most common contemporary electoral systems are First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) utilized in countries like the United Kingdom and Canada, the Democratic Republic system as exemplified by the United States, and Proportional Representation (PR), which is the standard in many European nations like Sweden and the Netherlands.

Among various systems, Proportional Representation (PR) arguably best represents people's will in terms of accountability and responsibility. The PR system aims to reflect public political preferences accurately in the legislature by allotting seats in proportion to the popular vote, encouraging diverse representation, including smaller parties [10]. As a result, PR often leads to coalition governments, promoting negotiation, compromise, and consensus, which enhance governance accountability and responsibility. For instance, in the 2018 Swedish parliamentary elections, eight parties won seats, reflecting political diversity [11]. The resulting coalition government showcased the necessary compromise in PR systems. Critics, however, argue PR can cause political fragmentation and unstable governments, as seen in Belgium's 2010 election, which led to a lengthy government formation process that took 541 days [12]. Still, as shown in Sweden, effective structures and political culture can mitigate these potential drawbacks.

In contrast, the FPTP system, also known as winner-takes-all, rewards the candidate who receives the most votes in a particular district or constituency, regardless of whether they achieve an outright majority [13]. While this system fosters direct representation and tends to produce stable governing majorities, it risks marginalizing smaller parties and views that don't command a plurality in any one district. For instance, FPTP can result in scenarios wherein a political party obtains a majority of parliamentary seats despite not securing a majority of the overall popular vote. This condition can be appraised as a potential causation of a gap between the administration's stance and the prevailing public mood: case in point being the UK's 2019 general election, where there was a discrepancy between the number of seats acquired by the Conservative Party - 56% of the seats in the House of Commons - compared to the proportion of the popular vote they won, which was merely 43.6% [14]. The outcome being imbalanced, which is a frequent objection to FPTP mechanisms, underscores the risk of smaller political factions and their ideas being excluded due to their inability to secure a majority in any individual electoral district.

On the other hand, the Democratic Republic system allows citizens to elect their representatives, who are subsequently authorized to make significant decisions, such as enacting legislation, for the benefit of the citizens. While this system has measures to ensure responsible conduct, such as predetermined term-lengths and impeachment processes, it may occasionally result in the overruling of public support by elected officials, particularly when confronted with partisan stalemate. One notable example is Affordable Care Act (ACA) in 2010. Although public opinion polls indicated a notable opposition to the legislation, the Affordable Care Act was enacted by the congressional majority [15]. This exemplifies how a Democratic Republic form of governance grants elected officials the authority to make decisions that may not necessarily conform to the prevailing public opinion, especially in cases of partisan impasse.

#### 4. Limitations of Elections

Elections, while key to democratic governance and ideally reflecting people's will, aren't perfect. For instance, consider the issues of large political donations and media bias during the 2012 US presidential election. Campaigns and political action committees collectively spent over \$7 billion, a historic amount mainly coming from wealthy individuals and corporations [16]. This raises questions about whether elected officials' actions and decisions truly represent people's will or skew towards the interests of these affluent donors. Likewise, media influence in shaping public opinion is significant. For instance, Fox News presented Donald Trump positively, while CNN portrayed him negatively for the same actions during that election [17]. Yet, some argue that even with these distortive influences, people's will isn't formed in isolation but is influenced by various factors, including money and media. People still maintain their decision-making ability; they're not simply passive information recipients but active evaluators. They can seek alternative information sources, compare different viewpoints, and make decisions based on their critical evaluation, suggesting that their positions and votes truly reflect their will.

Similarly, voting interference based on vested interests poses a significant obstacle to maintaining the democratic processes necessarily for the election of representatives that reflect voters' will. Enactment of stringent identification regulations, cessation of polling venues, and assertive elimination of voters from electoral rolls can significantly impede the participation of minority and low-income voters, thereby jeopardizing their chance to engage in the democratic electoral system. A prime example of this is Georgia's 2018 midterm elections, in which there was widespread closure and consolidation of polling stations in predominantly African American neighborhoods [18]. These changes led to increased wait times and difficulties in accessing voting sites, effectively suppressing votes from these communities. Critics argue that such practices are not inherent to elections and could be mitigated with more stringent laws and regulations. Yet, the persistence of such practices across many democratic societies indicates a systemic problem that challenges the validity of elections as a pure expression of the people's will, necessitating comprehensive reforms to ensure equal representation.

#### 5. Conclusion

Elections, despite their imperfections and potential drawbacks, perhaps remain the most effective method for expressing the will of the people by providing sanctioned means for citizens to participate in governance, select their representatives, and hold them accountable. The responsibility and accountability of elected officials, absent in monarchies and dictatorships, are fundamental components of democratic systems. Elections enable peaceful transitions of power and ensure that the actions and decisions of elected officials align with the interests and desires of the electorate. Although different electoral systems have their strengths and weaknesses, proportional representation (PR) stands out for its ability to accurately reflect diverse political preferences and encourage compromise and coalition governments. While elections face challenges such as financial influences and media bias, the agency of individual voters and their capacity to critically evaluate information help maintain the integrity of the electoral process. Efforts to address issues like voting interference and unequal representation are necessary to enhance the legitimacy and fairness of elections. In the end, despite their limitations, elections remain the best bet compared to other forms of government in upholding the will of the people and ensuring democratic governance.

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