



Why Bother to Vote? Why Elections Are Losing Their Lustre

By Seema Shah



A couple of years ago, there was a contentious [debate](#) in academic and policy circles about the perceived decline in global democracy. Through all the talk about how to define democracy and measure its growth and reversal, one thing remained certain: the sanctity of elections. Regardless of whether or not democracy is advancing, elections retain their position at the center of any legitimate democratic system. Problematic though they might be, elections represent the height of political progress.

When there is public outcry over an election, it usually revolves around a particular aspect of the electoral process: the merits and/or drawbacks of election technology, controversy around how votes are counted, the source of campaign money; the list goes on. This has especially been the case in the last year, as people reacted in shock to -and looked for flaws in- the electoral process after the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union and Donald Trump won the American presidential election.

But how do we know that elections themselves are still a broadly accepted and publicly legitimate way to select leaders? And given that even dictatorial leaders are often happy to hold elections, what is their real value in advancing democracy around the world?

The Erosion of Electoral Credibility

It turns out that people around the world are wondering the same thing. In fact, more than ever before, citizens from across the globe report that elections are not necessarily a defining part of a democratic system. In the 2010-2014 wave of the [World Values Survey](#), for instance, less than half of all respondents (41.5 percent) agreed with the view that elections are an essential characteristic of democracy. This represents a significant drop from the previous round of the survey (2005-2009), when more than half of the respondents (52.3 percent) expressed that elections are an essential part of democratic systems. This drop goes hand in hand with a sinking faith in democracy overall. From 2005-2009 to 2010-2014, there was a 7.1 percentage drop in the proportion of people around the world who felt that democracy is “absolutely important.”

It isn't difficult to see that elections are losing their lustre. But why? In representative democracies, elections empower citizens to stand in judgment of their (prospective) leaders. Even if only for a short while, elections shine a spotlight on ordinary voters, providing a platform for them to debate, reflect and ultimately assess their choices. Voters hold ultimate power in elections...or do they?

Unfortunately, elections around the globe today have lost much of this original sense of purpose. This is hardly surprising. Over time, elites have used their positions and power to gradually distance electoral processes from the people, and this has created electoral contests that hinge on little more than big money and elite strategy. As a result, the rules that govern elections often do not uphold the principles of democracy, and ordinary voters do not hold the reigns of power in elections anymore.

Electoral Systems

In some ways, it all starts with the electoral system. Although the design of a country's electoral system — involving calculations of district sizes and populations, determinations of boundaries and vote to seat ratios — may seem like a purely technical process, the choice has serious political implications. At their core, after all, electoral systems determine how votes get counted and translated into seats; they determine who has a chance of a seat at the table. Electoral systems are thus at the heart of democratic design.

Since the choice of electoral system design impacts many later phases of the electoral cycle — especially party and coalition formation and campaign strategy — it is a stage setter, providing the framework and incentive structure for electoral stakeholders' behavior. A majoritarian system, for instance, tends to favor larger communities — often to the detriment of smaller groups — by requiring only a simple majority for electoral victory. In so [much](#) of the world, these types of winner-take-all electoral systems risk creating a tyranny of the majority. They also often produce governments that are seen to be “unfair” in the sense that the number of seats a party wins can often be highly disproportionate to the number of votes that party garnered. Parties who do not manage to win a majority of votes but who still capture a substantial amount of support are left with absolutely no access to decision-making power. In 2015, the controversy surrounding first past the post was brought to the fore in the United Kingdom. There, the Conservatives [won](#) 37 percent of the vote and 51 percent of parliamentary seats. The party therefore received a parliamentary majority with less than half of the electorate's support.

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Of course, other electoral systems - even ones that seek to produce more "fair," proportional results - have their problems. Proportional representation may give more parties a seat at the table, but it can also bestow striking amounts of power to the smallest and most ideologically extreme parties, who become "[kingmakers](#)" in the kinds of coalition governments that PR systems produce. In Israel, for example, hard-line members of ruling coalitions have routinely [blocked](#) potential agreements related to the conflict with Palestinians over "any slight movement perceived as anti-settler."

Electoral systems are not just about vote counting; they can also determine *whose* vote counts. In the United States, Donald Trump won the presidential election without winning the majority of Americans' votes. In fact, Hillary Clinton received almost 3 million more popular votes than Trump, which [represented](#) the most votes ever won by a losing candidate in American history. Since it is the votes of the American electoral college, made up of elite party insiders, that ultimately decide the victor, the popular vote can end up determining nothing.

It is easy to see why such systems provide real disincentives to popular participation, especially for non-mainstream voters. Indeed, a post-election poll in the United States [revealed](#) that a mere 30 percent of surveyed Americans felt the electoral system was functional. 70 percent said that it was broken.

Money in Politics

Of course, electoral system design is just the tip of the iceberg. The electoral playing field is also heavily skewed by the growing role of money - both legal and illicit - in electoral contests. Without regulations that limit donations and expenditures, require regular and full disclosure of funding sources, and that incentivize close interaction with voters, it is all too easy for politicians to fall prey to a small group of wealthy donors who can and do influence policy formulation in the years between elections. In this situation, ordinary voters must fight to be heard, and even when they are they must struggle to compete with affluent elites. This kind of situation is also self-perpetuating. Once elected, leaders will think about how to retain their positions; the quest for campaign contributions and the subsequent quid pro quo may go on for the entirety of elites' electoral careers.

This type of election is hardly voter-centered. Indeed, the Kofi Annan-led [Global Commission on Elections, Democracy and Security](#) listed uncontrolled, undisclosed and opaque political finance as a "grave threat" to the credibility of elections. "In an era of explosive growth in campaign expenditure across older democracies, citizens lose faith in the electoral process. They suspect that wealthier citizens and corporations have greater influence in public affairs...Poorly regulated campaign finance in turn leads to lower participation in the democratic process, tainted electoral integrity and impaired democracy."

Examples of these situations abound. In India, where the election commission has set fundraising and expenditure limits, politicians [resort](#) to "black money" from the criminal underworld. Politicians have been forthcoming about the reality of the situation. In fact, former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee is often [cited](#) for saying that "every legislator starts his career with the lie of the false election return he files." In 2012, parliamentarians discussed spending as much as \$3.3 million on campaigns, despite expenditure limits of \$26,000. To put this in perspective, the average Indian person [earned](#) \$1,480 at that time, roughly 6 percent of the official limit and .04 percent of the maximum \$3.3 million quoted by politicians. In Kenya, where parliament refused to pass a campaign finance regulatory bill into law, candidates have spent millions even before the official beginning of the campaign period. In the run up to the primary elections in April, for instance, aspirants in the North Rift region of the country [spent](#) approximately Sh850 million (\$8.2 million) on their campaigns. In the Uasin Gishu region, the leading opposition party's top two gubernatorial aspirants each spent Sh100 million (\$967,000) in the primary contest.

Given the dangers, it is surprising how little regulation there is around these issues. In fact, around the world, only about a quarter of all countries in a global study [banned](#) corporate donations to political parties, less than half [prohibited](#) donations from corporations with government contracts to political parties, and just 4 in 10 [outlawed](#) anonymous donations to candidates. Rules about disclosure aren't much better. Just 50 percent of countries [require](#) political parties to submit financial reports in relation to election campaigns.

In such contexts, it comes as little surprise that voters don't have faith in electoral processes. Average voters can't compete with big business, and it is easy to understand that some would think there is no point in trying.

Media and Elections

Voters also greatly depend on the media during elections. Indeed, as the conduit of information to the public, the media play a pivotal role in electoral processes. Voters rely on the media to learn about candidates' and parties' platforms, to debate with other voters on the current issues, and to find the practical information necessary to cast ballots. Furthermore, the media act as watchdogs, safeguarding the transparency of the process. Without credible information, voters stand little chance of making informed decisions at the ballot box.

Unfortunately, however, media around the world are in crisis. In its most recent report, the Electoral Integrity Project [lists](#) media as one of the two (the other was campaign finance) most serious obstacles to a level electoral playing field. There are many challenges to free and independent media today, but some of the most critical election-related problems include:

Freedom of the Media: Media cannot fulfill its duties to society in a politically restricted environment. It is thus worrying that the 2017 edition of the [World Press Freedom Index](#) lists only fifteen countries (out of 180) in its most free category ("good situation"). Of these, twelve are located in northern and western Europe. In other countries, media outlets and journalists face high-profile bashing - increasingly from elites, financial restrictions, threats, physical abuse and violence, and an oppressive legal environment. Notably, the Index singles out the African continent for the recent spate of internet shutdowns during elections.

The 2017 Index warns of a ["tipping point"](#) in the state of media freedom, especially in democracies. The report states that media freedom "has never been so threatened," and documents a 14 percent rise in the overall level of media constraints and violations over a five year period as well as how an "obsession" with surveillance and the death of respect for confidential sources have contributed to the decline of many consolidated democracies.

Consolidation: The vast majority of media outlets are owned by an increasingly smaller number of people and firms. In Australia, for instance, the News Corporation and associated Rupert Murdoch companies [own](#) 57.5 percent of the country's newspapers. In Chile, El Mercurio SAP owns 54.9 percent of that country's newspaper market. The concentration of media ownership means that there is less diversity of opinion in the public domain. Without multiple, diverging viewpoints and feisty public debate, voters are less informed and thus less able to make independent and free choices on election day.

A majoritarian system, for instance, tends to favor larger communities - often to the detriment of smaller groups - by requiring only a simple majority for electoral victory.

Access to Media: Media become especially critical during election campaigns, when candidates and

parties rely on television, radio, newspapers and the internet to communicate with the public. Without regulation of some sort, smaller, less affluent contenders will struggle to access the media and therefore to reach voters. In 67.2 percent of cases, countries [provide](#) subsidized access to media for political parties, but in many of those cases that subsidy is based on the party's share of the vote/number of seats in the previous election, or even on the number of candidates running. Newer and smaller parties are thus at an extreme disadvantage. In cases where there is no subsidy for media access, the costs can be prohibitive. In the United States, for instance, presidential candidate Hillary Clinton [spent](#) approximately \$227 million on media. That was 58 percent of her total expenditures for the campaign. Donald Trump [spent](#) less in actual dollars, but it still amounted to 59 percent of his campaign's total expenditures.

Without the freedom to report honestly and in safety and without a balanced playing field, characterized by equal access to media, voters are at a distinct disadvantage, simply because they do not have the opportunity to freely and easily obtain the information they need to make informed decisions about their choices on election day as well as about the legitimacy of their electoral processes. This is even more true as global threats to internet freedom grow.

These problems threaten media's connection to the public around the world. They also serve to perpetuate elite dominance in the electoral arena, undermining the rights to information and the freedoms of expression and speech that are fundamental to democracy.

Electoral Manipulation

As if the issues outlined above were not enough, old-fashioned rigging continues to be a problem in elections around the world. Despite the advent of electoral technology, which is perceived by some as a way to prevent many polling station-level crimes, in many parts of the world, elections are still susceptible to ballot box stuffing, multiple voting, underage voting, and voter bribery.

These types of incidents are regular occurrences, happening all over the world. Egypt provides an exemplary case in point. In 2010, observers [cited](#) the removal of opposition candidates' names from ballots, blocking opposition agents from entering polling stations, premature closing of polling stations and ballot box stuffing. Evidence in the public record included photos and videos of voter intimidation and election officials filling in blank ballots. In 2014, turnout was so low during the scheduled two days of voting that the election commission took the step of adding a third day. International observers called this a "needless irregularity." On the night before this additional day, the opposition candidate withdrew his monitors because security forces were abusing them. In 2015, Egyptian elections were [marked](#) by widespread vote-buying and violence. In fact, the situation was so extreme that some candidates dropped out of the race.

The same issues can be seen in many other parts of the world. Recent analysis [cites](#) allegations of electoral fraud in Russia, election related violence and the theft of vote counting machines in the Philippines, and irregular figures from results sheets in Gabon. In Nigeria, accusations of double voter registration are [threatening](#) the legitimacy of a sitting governor and a British MP is on [trial](#) for 14 counts of electoral fraud.

Allegations of rigging are also occurring in relation to election technology. The United States 2016 election is perhaps one of the best known recent examples of polls tainted by such accusations, but the vulnerability of election technology is well known in other parts of the world. In 2016, Andrés Sepúlveda [revealed](#) how, beginning in 2005, he manipulated elections for a variety of clients across the South American continent, ultimately having a hand in nine different countries. Just before the 2016 election in the Philippines, hackers [attacked](#) the country's election commission website and compromised personal data of approximately 70 million people.

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And this isn't all. The drawing of electoral boundaries, the drafting and amending of laws, access to voter registration, electoral dispute resolution and many other aspects of the electoral process can all be skewed to serve private rather than public interests. In recent years, much of the conversation and rhetoric around elections has focused on trying to determine how many problems, or exactly what problems, constitute a fraudulent election. This is a difficult question – after all, the manipulation of even one part of the electoral process can impact a number of stages later on. If it is clear that private interests have trumped public interests in even one phase of elections, shouldn't that be enough?

Are polls passé?

For some, issues such as the ones raised above call the very legitimacy of elections into question. For these critics, the solution does not lie in bolstering the electoral process; it rests in upending reliance on elections altogether.

Indeed, one [argument](#) is that elections are outdated, relatively undemocratic and far from the best way to channel people's thoughts and opinions.

Isn't it bizarre that voting, our highest civic duty, boils down to an individual action performed in the silence of the voting booth? Is this really the place where we turn individual gut feelings into shared priorities? Is it really where the common good and the long term are best served?... Imagine having to develop a system today that would express the will of the people. Would it really be a good idea to have them all queue up at polling stations every four or five years with a bit of card in their hands and go into a dark booth to put a mark next to names on a list, names of people about whom restless reporting had been going on for months in a commercial environment that profits from restlessness?

The argument has its merits. Although elections are processes, made up of multiple phases and activities, each of which has its individual purpose and impact on the final result, the majority of attention, money and work is – more often than not – focused on election day and the counting and announcement of votes. Practically, then, an election is about individual decisions at the ballot box. One tick and it's all over.

There is also the argument that electoral democracy is a particularly western conception, designed for particular social systems that are organized quite differently from social structures and systems in other parts of the world. Thomas Koelble and Edward LiPuma [contend](#), for example, that “the real measure of democracy is the extent to which governance conforms to the visions of democracy worked out by the governed.” Elections, at least the way they are currently practiced, may not factor into all visions of democracy.

In this reality, what are the other options? Should the focus be – as it has been for the last two decades – on improving electoral processes? Or is there another way altogether? Is it time to reconsider elections as the preferred mode of choosing political leaders?

That may already be happening.

In many places around the world, new political movements – many of which have sprung from waves of popular protests against the corruption, greed, and self-serving mindsets of politicians, are working to create innovative structures through which citizens and voters can easily and directly

participate in governance. While these movements do not necessarily reject the concept of elections, they place as much – if not more – importance on internal democracy and consensus. As a result, they approach elections from a position that has grown much more directly from constituents’ and members’ input and decisions than those of traditional parties.

It comes as little surprise that voters don’t have faith in electoral processes. Average voters can’t compete with big business, and it is easy to understand that some would think there is no point in trying.

By placing ordinary people at the center, these movements are defining new modes of direct democracy. Indeed, the [Podemos](#) party in Spain makes [use](#) of digital platforms like [Loomio](#) and [Reddit](#), which allow citizens to take part in policy discussions, vote on senior party positions and come to consensus on issues under debate. Similarly new movements in [India](#) and Italy make efforts to grow from the local level upwards, prioritizing grassroots issues.

Another possibility is sortition, or drafting by lot. In this system, a random sample of the population comes together to learn about selected topics, hear from experts, debate with each other and make decisions. In this way, everyone does not vote on a range of issues that few understand. Instead, a randomly selected group of people takes the time to comprehensively understand a set of questions and make well-informed decisions. This body could then interact with elected representatives to draft legislation. Proponents argue that sortition reduces corruption and promotes attention to the common good. Sortition is not new. It was used in ancient Athens, and it has been and/or is being [used](#) in Bolivia, Australia, Canada, China, the Netherlands, [Ireland](#) and the [United States](#).

The new political movements and the concept of sortition demand much more of people than mainstream elections. This makes sense; it takes significant effort and time to weigh the policy choices facing society. Elected representatives, regardless of their experience and expertise, can only do so much on their own; citizens and voters must be active participants, providing their leaders with the information they require to make informed decisions and constantly demanding accountability.

It may be that if elections are to regain and maintain legitimacy, they, too, will have to ask more of voters. And voters should demand more of their elections, if it’s not already too late.

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