

**Review of Przeworski, Adam 2018, *Why Bother with Elections?* Cambridge: Polity Press, ix + 141 pp., £12.99 (paperback). ISBN: 9781509526604.**

**Published in *Representation*, 20 July 2019:**

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00344893.2019.1643775>

Why do so many people still hope at each new election that things will go better despite feeling that they will end up disappointed as usual? Why should we value elections if they seem unlikely to lead to deep societal transformations? These are some of the fascinating questions that Adam Przeworski takes up in his latest book, *Why Bother with Elections?* – an excellent and sometimes amusing synthesis in plain language of decades of comparative work on elections.

His answers are the following. Most people vote because the habit of having a say in the selection of rulers is addictive. Furthermore, where elections are competitive, i.e. when the result is hard to predict, it does make a difference who wins – even if it can appear as a small difference to many people. Yet elections do not deliver rational or just policies. Elected governments do not outperform authoritarian ones in terms of wealth creation. They can do little against economic inequality in societies where productive resources are in private hands and economic inequality transforms into political inequality. And they cannot even secure effective control of the rulers by the population or appropriate representation of majority aspirations. This is why we always end up disappointed.

Hence, according to Przeworski, we should not value elections for epistemic reasons, in other words for their capacity to lead to quality decisions. We should value them for two other instrumental reasons: they minimize popular dissatisfaction with laws and they allow societies to regulate conflicts peacefully, to avoid bloodshed.

This somewhat crude view of democracy is formed in the observation of elections in all kind of regimes – not only democracies. The interesting conclusion that results from endorsing such a wide view is that elections have pacifying virtues even in authoritarian regimes. The average life expectancy of a regime is 20 years when rulers enter into power by force and do not hold elections; 25 years when they hold elections without allowing opposition; 46 years when elections are contested; 87 years when peaceful alternation has occurred at least once (p. 116).

To explain this, Przeworski contends that, competitive or not, elections convey a message to the opposition about the risks it would incur in case of mutiny. And when the losers know that they will have their chance again, in competitive elections, accepting the (temporary) defeat becomes less costly.

### **Unrealistic expectations?**

Hence, civil peace is the main value of electoral democracy. Expectations vis-à-vis elections can nonetheless be different in stable democracies from new and unstable ones. Przeworski identifies two criteria of democratic stability: (1) the wealth of a country, which reduces the incentives to initiate an armed conflict, because political actors have more to lose than when they are starving; and (2) the habit of alternation, which engenders mutual trust between competing parties.

Why couldn't we want more than civil peace – a reduction of social injustices, for example, in rich democracies where alternation is frequent? Przeworski has three main responses. First, elections are competitive and peaceful only if the stakes are not too high, i.e. if they have limited capacity to transform social, economic or political conditions (p. 119). Otherwise, losers would have too much to lose and would not take the risk to peacefully wait for their turn. Second, the capitalist system of property puts so much power in a few hands that inequalities of influence are massive. Third, representative institutions have been designed and shaped, through the multiplication of veto players and independent institutions, “to disable governments from doing much of anything” (p. 20). Hence, we should not expect radical reforms – let alone social justice – resulting from elections.

However, what Przeworski does not consider in his book is the possibility that competitive elections tend to diminish several injustices irreducible to economic inequalities over time, such as discrimination and domination. Looking backwards, we can observe some progress towards formal equality in most advanced democracies. As famously pointed out by Karl Marx (1875), equal rights and equal formal opportunities have little value in a context of large economic inequality. Yet, it can be considered as a social progress when women increase their opportunities to find a rewarding job; when LGBT's gain social recognition; or when minority cultures become less dominated.

Current political trends indicate that this historical progress is probably not irreversible, but it is nonetheless real in many democracies. Moreover, democratic states have, in the past, shown a capacity to tame the social effects of market inequalities. Given that they have lost much regulating power in an increasingly globalized economy, it is not surprising that elections now have little effect on people's living conditions. However, the main reason is that democratic mechanisms do not operate at the right scale. If electorally authorized supranational authorities could develop, the collective stakes of elections – not the impact of an individual vote – could raise again.

Therefore, what is somewhat lacking in this otherwise rich and convincing study of elections, is an examination of the mechanisms by which demands for equal rights and for the protection of the vulnerable tend to permeate through competitive elections, and why they tend to permeate more in some countries than in other.

### **Elections' epistemic virtues**

Because Przeworski does not seem to acknowledge this progress in terms of formal rights, the epistemic justification of electoral democracy – based on the quality of its average decisions – is laid aside a bit too fast. Of course, a quick look around the world of real politics provides many examples of collective irrationality and injustice resulting from elections. Nevertheless, elections do not need to deliver perfect rationality and justice to be epistemically justified. It suffices that they can be expected to do better than alternative forms of selection or collective decision making.

In order to consider their epistemic potential, it may be preferable to avoid mathematical theorems with implausible or unverifiable assumptions, such as the Condorcet Jury Theorem, which Przeworski rightfully considers as irrelevant when assessing real politics. A more promising approach consists in identifying the characteristics of electoral democracy that can increase or decrease either the rationality or the moral rightness of collective decisions compared to alternatives. Rationality can be defined, according to Przeworski, as picking the

best means to pursue whatever collective goals we might have, such as prosperity or social justice. Justice, then, is obviously a contested concept, its understanding varying a lot from one person to another. It can nonetheless be defined, sufficiently broadly to escape most controversies, as impartiality, this principle of impartiality being understood as forbidding favoring some social groups over others (unless it is necessary to remedy a preexisting disadvantage). Thus understood, justice as impartiality, certainly forbids discrimination, social exclusion, and privileges, which most people would agree to consider as unjust.

Do we have reasons to believe that elections offer more promises of rationality and justice thus understood than plausible alternatives? I think we do. First of all, elections allow more easily than authoritarian rule for trial, error and correction. The reiteration of elections, combined with freedom of expression, permits a continuous reevaluation of the way we are ruled, with feedback from people who are ruled, which is a considerable informational advantage compared to autocracy or technocracy. Granted, as suggested by Przeworski, popular policies protecting income security for example might be more difficult to revert than in autocracies, but this might be valuable. One important value of elections highlighted by the author is that when they operate through simple majority rule, they minimize popular dissatisfaction with how we are ruled. Admittedly, popular satisfaction does not guarantee rationality or justice. It is nonetheless a good indicator. On the one hand, people will not be satisfied with policies incapable of bringing about the dominant collective goals – irrational policies. On the other hand, people will usually not be satisfied with policies disadvantaging them. In other words, elections might minimize disadvantage, compared to alternatives, and thus injustice.

Arguably, one person might be dissatisfied and feel disadvantaged for morally illegitimate reasons, e. g. a person losing previous privileges. Therefore, the minimization of dissatisfaction does not guarantee a minimization of injustices. However, the former is the best proxy we have for the latter: trying to satisfy as many citizens as possible is the best bet to reduce domination and disadvantage in a context where people disagree about what counts as a disadvantage or as domination. The closer the preferences of the majority will be to the demands of social justice, the closer the minimization of dissatisfaction will get to the minimization of injustices.

Besides, the freedoms of expression and association which seem indispensable to competitive elections make room for an active public sphere conveying more information and fostering more public deliberation than elections alone can. Freedom of expression, on the one hand, permits the contradiction of the rulers' beliefs, which is essential to the possibility of correcting false judgements. Freedom of association, on the other hand, allows citizen initiatives and NGOs to experiment and influence governments, and even sometimes to compensate for governments' shortcomings.

Certainly, elections also suffer from many epistemic shortcomings. To name a few that are well explained by Przeworski: campaigning is costly and this deepens inequality of influence; elections are always somewhat manipulated by the incumbents; they are a "blunt instrument for controlling governments" (p. 97); they create an inflation of promises that cannot be honored. The merit of recognizing these shortcomings, as argued by the author, is on the one hand to tame unrealistic expectations that can only benefit anti-system parties blaming traditional parties for their voluntary betrayal of people's aspirations; and on the other hand, to point to more feasible reforms to improve our democracies, such as the regulation of political financing and some independent supervision of electoral rules.

## Beyond civil peace

However, we probably need more than the promise of civil peace to justify democratic institutions against the growing temptation to delegate political power to unelected bodies, such as central banks or the EU Commission, supposedly safe from collective irrationality. Przeworski recognizes the latter trend, which he perceives as the latest attempt by elites to protect private property from the people's dangerous egalitarian temptation, after restricted suffrage, repression of the opposition, indirect elections, open voting, bicameralism and judicial review (p. 28-46). But if the only justification of elections is their pacifying power and if a slow shift towards technocratic government preserves civil peace, we are left without objections to the hollowing of our democracies. This is why recognizing the epistemic value of elections matters.

What is more, we need to be able to justify the choice of elections vis-à-vis their historical alternative: the random selection of representatives. Przeworski seems to consider this method of selection as implausible because unelected representatives cannot be held accountable. However, if he is right about the limits of electoral accountability, finding a “blunt” mechanism for making randomly selected representatives accountable, such as a possibility of recall or, more simply, open voting and deliberations in parliament and public pressure, could suffice to make of sortition a real contender to elections. The interesting question, which the author does not consider, is whether sortition could also have a pacifying effect. Given that sortition would reduce the sociological distance between representatives and the people and that other spaces of participation are left for the non-randomly-selected, it is not implausible to think that it would.

Nevertheless, elections also enjoy an epistemic advantage compared to sortition by working as a filter of competence. Clearly, this filter does not exclude incompetent people from political power. Unless one is famous for other reasons, s/he will have to show some political qualities at lower layers of power or inside a party before making a chance to be elected to an important position. Compared to the random selection of representatives, elections allow for political specialization and the development of some political competencies. Hence, among the political arrangements showing equal respect for citizens' political judgments (elections and sortition), elections might be the best at fostering competent government. What remains to be seen is whether this suffices to justify elections in light of some other epistemic shortcomings that they tend to generate, such as insufficiently diverse parliaments or short-termism – two dimensions where sortition would likely outperform elections.

In sum, the prospects of civil peace, which make the main value of elections according to Przeworski, might be necessary to defend elections against autocracy, but more work should probably be done – in particular regarding the epistemic virtues of elections – to defend electoral democracy against technocracy or epistocracy on the one hand, and against sortition-based democracy on the other hand.

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