

Elections.

Nothing More, Nothing Less

About: Adam Przeworski, *Why Bother With Elections?*,
Wiley

by Antoine Verret-Hamelin

What can we expect from elections? A. Przeworski urges us to be minimalist: elections provide only imperfect control over the actions of those in power and are not enough to counteract the political effects of inequalities, but they are still the best way to resolve conflicts without taking up arms.

Since the French and American revolutions of the 18th century, elections have become the royal road to understanding democracy, but the debate on the vices and virtues of elective democracy is far from over. While some philosophers have taken an interest in elections as an ideal type, Adam Przeworski, on the other hand, encourages us to engage in a realistic, contextualised and historically informed reflection on the benefits and limitations of elections as we have experienced them up to now. In his latest book, *Why Bother With Elections?*,¹ the influential political scientist offers a nuanced and accessible assessment of the value of elections.

This summary, which is general and yet sensitive to national and historical particularities, moves back and forth between the early days of modern electoral democracy—Przeworski takes the election of the first United States Congress in 1788

¹ This review was first published in laviedesidees.fr upon the publication of the excellent French translation of the book by Salim Hirèche, published by the no less excellent Markus Haller publishing house dedicated to the translation of essays in the humanities and social sciences.

as a symbolic starting point—and the more recent tribulations of elected leaders such as Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin. Similarly, at times Przeworski is quick to depart from contemporary research to draw on the classics, from Montesquieu and the American Founding Fathers to Edmund Burke, Karl Marx, and others.

The common thread in the book is the notion that we should not expect too much from elections; they cannot achieve the ideals of political equality or popular self-government because they are only a means of appointing leaders. They are highly imperfect, but "no other method of selecting our rulers, I believe, can do better." (p. 18)

A Revolutionary Idea

Przeworski begins by painting a realistic picture of elections and their history. According to the author, the idea that political leaders should be representatives appointed by the people through the ballot box surfaced at the end of the 18th century, during the French and American revolutions. The first standard-bearers of this democratic vision, such as the Abbé Sieyès in France and James Wilson in the United States, overturned the dominant political ideology according to which the sovereign's right to govern derived from the divine will, the natural order of things or even the sovereign's identity of interests with the population (on this point, the reader will regret the lack of any discussion of the first thinkers of popular sovereignty, such as John Locke). Elections in their embryonic form—initially excluding women, the poor and the "uncivilised"—spread at extraordinary speed (p. 37) during the 19th century, in several European countries but also in Latin America (beginning with Paraguay in 1814) and Liberia in 1847. Their introduction everywhere was "sudden" (p. 40) according to Przeworski. The myth of self-government through elections was born.

The Immense Gap between Government and Governed

Indeed, for the author, this is largely a myth because elections perpetuate a political division of labour in which those who govern have the effective power to impose rules that the governed are forced to observe. The electoral control that a population exercises over its rulers and their mandate is a flawed mechanism. Prospective control—choosing a government for its platform and electoral

promises—is limited because of unforeseen circumstances during the term of office and the possibility that a government will betray the majority that elected it, even if that means winning over a new majority in the next election. In retrospect, it is difficult for the electorate to sanction a government (by voting against its party) for deviating from its interests, particularly because of the inadequate information available to voters on the real actions of the government and the real consequences of such actions. In addition, a government undertakes multiple actions—budgetary measures, diplomatic actions, various bills, etc. Thus, a government may diverge from the interests of the electorate on issues that will not be decisive in assessing its record.

This very imperfect control of those in government therefore leaves them a great deal of room for manoeuvre, particularly to manipulate elections and election rules so as to maximize their own chances of remaining in power from one electoral cycle to the next. The opportunities for electoral manipulation and repression are legion: moving constituency boundaries, choice of polling day and polling station locations, media manipulation, party and campaign financing rules, manipulation of public administrations, suppressing the opposition, fraud and so on. For Przeworski, "it is unreasonable to expect that competing parties might abstain from doing whatever they can to enhance their electoral advantage." (p.135) Even though more mature democracies have institutional bulwarks such as an independent body separate from the government to orchestrate elections, opportunistic strategies remain at hand. For instance, while David Cameron was subtly questioning the legitimacy of the student opposition in England, Nicolas Sarkozy was obtaining police reports to keep an eye on the private lives of his opponents in France.

Although the extension of suffrage and the gradual legitimisation of the opposition are real victories, the fact remains that dubious electoral manoeuvres allow the elite to remain typically in power. Indeed, it is the members of the wealthy and educated classes who become the representatives of the people. The American Founding Fathers' intention was to encourage the selection of the "best" rather than the individuals who best represented the people, or citizens from all walks of life. This is why the profoundly "aristocratic" nature of the election has been highlighted.² Przeworski reminds us that in France, as in the United States and England, the first voters were wealthy men. This aristocratic dimension was also felt in the application of measures that put pressure on voting among disadvantaged people, such as public voting, where the employee may have felt undue pressure while casting his vote under

² Bernard Manin, *The Principles of representative government*, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

his employer's watchful eye. Even today, traces of this aristocratic element are still apparent, for example in the eligibility criteria for running for public office, such as in France, where presidential candidates must first win the support of 500 elected officials. In the United States, it is imperative to raise private funds in order to run a campaign, and to have a voter's card in order to vote, both of which are detrimental to the poorest. Finally, Przeworski notes that, as a general rule, it is the most privileged citizens (academics, religious leaders, career politicians, etc.) who enjoy a greater presence in public debate.

Therefore, the election cannot be expected to achieve the impossible and overturn the unequal structures of private property. For Przeworski, the main factor that explains why elections are unable to address economic inequalities is the conversion of money into political power, which creates a "vicious circle" (p. 203) in which economic and political inequalities are mutually reinforcing. Despite the electoral victories of the population, the elites manage to devise a multitude of barriers to protect their economic interests.

The Virtues of Elections

In short, elections fall far short of the ideals of self-government and political equality. Nevertheless, compared to alternative ways of appointing rulers, such as force or hereditary transmission, elections still have some virtues. If, like Przeworski, we uphold a minimalist definition of political rationality, that is, its reflection of the plurality of citizens' voices, then elections are indeed the "least bad" mode of collective decision-making. The control exercised by elected officials over those in power and their mandates is certainly imperfect, but not entirely ineffective³. In electoral democracies we find a level of economic stability which, even when there are high inequalities, offers better prospects of material well-being than under autocratic regimes.

The most important virtue of elections for Przeworski is the peaceful resolution of the social conflicts that inevitably occur in any pluralistic society. Przeworski thus remains faithful to his "minimalist" concept of democracy: elections are often manipulated along partisan lines, and they usually maintain the ruling party's

³ For another enlightening discussion of these virtues, see Hervé Pourtois, "Les élections sont-elles essentielles à la démocratie ?," *Philosophiques* 43, no. 2 (2016): 411–39.

dominance and the status quo with regard to the unequal distribution of property, but at least they enable us to avoid resolving our disagreements by force of arms. By revealing the opposing forces at play, elections serve as a reminder that conflict is never far away, and at the same time offer a substitute for repression and violent insurgency. This virtue is far from negligible, given the upheavals of history:

Yet electoral defeats of those in power were rare until very recently and peaceful changes of government even less frequent: only one in about five national elections resulted in defeats of incumbents and even fewer in a peaceful change in office."
(p. 22-23)

This electoral pacifism materialises as per-capita incomes rise and elections become a familiar and predictable collective habit.

And the Drawing of Lots?

The main criticism to be made of this erudite essay is the choice of the counterfactual: Przeworski compares elections with the transfer of power by force or inheritance. This choice overlooks the long history—and contemporaneousness—of drawing lots as a means of selecting rulers.⁴ It would be useful to compare (or combine) electoral democracy with lotocratic democracy, which offers certain advantages even from the point of view of the normative criteria upheld by Przeworski. For example, while Przeworski sees bicameralism as an additional brake on the expression of the majority principle, it is possible to envisage a deliberative upper house made up of citizens chosen by lot, a chamber that would perhaps better satisfy the requirements of rationality of collective decisions and independence from private interests.⁵

The essay perhaps has the defects of its qualities: its accessibility makes it a valuable book for the lay reader, but sometimes leaves the reader wanting more, as when a chapter on the important link between elections and economic performance ends after only nine pages. Overall, however, this summary of elections, given by a

⁴ Yves Sintomer, *Petite histoire de l'expérimentation démocratique : tirage au sort et politique d'Athènes à nos jours*, La Découverte, 2011.

⁵ Pierre-Étienne Vandamme and Antoine Verret-Hamelin, "A Randomly Selected Chamber: Promises and Challenges," *Journal of Public Deliberation* 13, no. 1 (2017).

leading researcher, is a vital contribution for anyone interested in democracy's past, virtues, limitations, and uncertain future.

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