

Can elections reflect the will of the people?

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Abstract. This paper will conduct a detailed analysis of the effectiveness of the electoral system from three perspectives to verify whether the election truly reflects the will of the people. First, we will explore the authenticity of the will of the people, that is, whether voters are able to express their political preferences and needs autonomously and independently, independent of external factors. In this regard, the investigation can include the voters' access to information, the independence of propaganda activities, and the voters' political awareness and ideological independence. Second, we will continue to assess the objectivity of the electoral process. An objective electoral process should be fair and transparent, ensure that every eligible voter has equal access to the election, and ensure that the counting of votes and the announcement of results are accurate and fair. From this perspective, we can focus on factors such as whether the design of the electoral system is sound, how engaged the electorate is, and the role and function of the election monitoring body. Finally, we will assess whether the people who are elected actually represent the will of the people. This requires an examination of whether the background and commitment of the person elected matches the political expectations and needs of the people. Whether the elected person can truly represent the interests of the voters and perform his duties within the scope of his duties is also an important indicator to assess whether the election truly reflects the will of the people.

Keywords: Election, democracy, political authority.

1. Introduction

In today's global society, almost all modern countries will use "democracy" as a justification for national development, especially western countries in Europe, which regard "representative democracy" as the only legitimate mode of democracy. Representative democracy takes "election" as the core of democracy and believes that the electoral system can reflect the will of the people, such as the parliamentary system adopted by the United Kingdom and Sweden, the federal system in Germany and the semi-presidential system in France, are good examples of this kind of democracy. It seems that as long as there are legitimate and regular elections, it is possible to produce governments that represent the will of the people and pursue policies that are in the interest of the people. However, since the beginning of the 21st century, more and more countries adopting representative democracy have gradually exposed serious problems, and the representativeness of the government to the will of the people has been continuously doubted. The talk of "democratic disconsolidation" and "democratic recession" is endless. This has led more and more people to think, can elections really reflect the will of the people? The rationality and feasibility of the electoral system has always been a hot topic of discussion among thinkers since ancient times. It is generally defined as the formal process of selecting a person for public office by voting or accepting or rejecting a political proposition. Theoretically speaking, in the process of election, it intuitively reflects the attitude of the masses towards the candidates or a certain political proposition, and follows the principle of minority obedience to majority, ensuring the right of most people to choose by themselves. However, in the real society, due to various social nature and complex factors, whether internal or external, the electoral system often presents different forms and levels of development, which indirectly affects its authenticity and effectiveness.

2. Authenticity of the will of the people

First, there is indeed some controversy and discussion as to whether a unified and objective "will of the people" really exists. As a problem in the field of social science, people have different views on the understanding and existence of this concept. In the fields of sociology and political science, some scholars believe that "the will of the people" is a relatively abstract and difficult to define concept, and different groups and individuals may have different understandings and interpretations of it. For example, cultural and psychosocial factors have an impact on people's understanding of terms such as "public interest" or "national interest", so people's understanding of these terms will vary in different cultural and social contexts. In addition, due to individual differences, citizens will have different, diversified and even contradictory understandings and cognition of political issues.

The political economist Joseph Schumpeter fundamentally denied the existence of a "general will" and a "will of the people." First, "there is no common good to which the whole population can agree or to which it can be uniquely determined by the force of reasonable argument." [1] This is because: (1) different individuals and groups have completely different and even fundamentally opposite judgments about what the "common welfare" is, and such differences in the ultimate value level cannot be bridged; (2) Even if people agree on the common welfare or happiness, they still disagree on the specific ways and means of achieving happiness.

Second, the democratic process also fails to form the so-called "will of the people." Schumpeter pointed out that if the "will of the people" is to exist, then "it must have something more than vague impulses that wander carelessly between hearsay slogans and false impressions." [1] That is to say, citizens must possess certain qualities, such as knowing exactly what they are supporting, having an independent will, being able to observe and interpret political facts correctly, and drawing conclusions clearly and quickly. But Schumpeter found that people simply do not possess these qualities. When ordinary people leave their homes and workplaces and enter the public sphere, they completely lose their sense of reality. For to them, politics is an illusory world, dealing with issues that seem so distant from them that they do not seem to have a real stake in the success or failure of major national events. As a result, this weak sense of reality not only weakens citizens' sense of responsibility, but also causes them to lose certain will, which in turn leads to ordinary citizens' ignorance and lack of judgment on public policy issues. [1] As a result, even without the influence of political groupings, citizens are at the mercy of superrational or irrational prejudices and impulses on political issues; And when many professional politicians, parties and interest groups attempt to manipulate and control by various means, they can change and even create the will of the people to a great extent. What we encounter in the analysis of the political process is not primarily real will, but manufactured will. This artificial thing is often adapted in reality to the general will in classical theory. So long as this is the case, the will of the people will not be the driving force of the political process, but only its product. [1]

At the same time, Arrow's impossibility theorem also questioned the existence of a unified and objective "will of the people". The theorem states that group preference order cannot be inferred from individual preference order. In other words, the will of the group cannot be accurately determined by the preferences of the individual. This theorem implies that there may be fairness problems in the electoral system, and the outcome largely depends on the designer of the electoral system. For example, suppose there are three candidates for president of A student union: A, B, and C. Among them, 101 people think $A > B > C$, 100 people think $C > A > B$, 95 people think $B > C > A$, and only one person thinks $B > A > C$. According to the electoral system, A is elected with 101 votes, but in fact, more people (195) think B is better than A. This example reveals that election results may not accurately reflect the will of the public, further deepening doubts about the existence of a unified, objective "will of the people." To sum up, the question of whether a unified and objective "will of the people" really exists is not simple, it involves the complexity of social science and the diversity of ideas. Understanding different viewpoints and conducting a detailed assessment of the electoral process can help us better understand the effectiveness of elections and provide references and

improvement directions for improving the electoral system and enhancing the democratic character of elections.

3. Objectivity of the election process

In addition, there are other factors that further expand the argument that the electoral process does not objectively reflect the will of the people. First, there may be some deviations and imperfections in the design and operation of the electoral system, leading to the deviation of the election results from the will of the people. For example, problems such as incomplete voter registration, inaccurate voter information, election fraud and vote buying may affect the accuracy and fairness of election results. These factors make the electoral process vulnerable to manipulation and do not accurately reflect the true will of the people.

Secondly, the influence of media and public opinion can also have a significant impact on the outcome of the election. The media's reports and comments during elections often lead voters to a certain extent. If the media does not report and comment on candidates' policies and behaviors objectively and imbalanced, or if there is media manipulation and bias, voters' choices may be misled and fail to truly reflect the will of the people. American scholars Thomas R. Dye and Harmon Zeigler have pointed out that in modern Western democratic elections, mass media campaigns directed by professional public relations and advertising experts have replaced party organizations in party campaigns. In Western countries today, it is almost impossible for a candidate who is unknown in the public media to win an election. Massive media attention can turn a previously unknown person into a prominent candidate overnight, or it can make an aspiring candidate go unnoticed or fail spectacularly. In election coverage, the media usually ignore political issues and focus instead on the image of the candidates, that is, on the personal characteristics of the candidates. [2] In the process, the really important political issues were sidelined, while the campaign business itself became increasingly professional, with teams creating images for candidates and monitoring their progress through constant polling; Placing advertisements in major media; Changing candidates' clothes and hairstyles based on voter feedback; Draft a speech; Plan appearances that will attract news coverage. Candidates and their teams spend most of their energy on these superficial efforts to get votes and vote for what voters want.

Third, the role of money in elections is also an important factor. Large amounts of money can skewing election results because candidates are able to use it to gain more media exposure, ground organization, and advertising to influence voters' choices. This makes the outcome likely to be shaped more by the power of capital than by the expression of the true will of the people. It can be said that in contemporary Western democracy, money is equivalent to oxygen, and politicians can hardly survive in politics without the support of big donors, so those politicians who have gained power naturally have to repay their donors. In this way money shapes politics. A 2004 report by the American Political Institute titled "American Democracy in an Age of Rising Inequality" found that the top 75 percent of voters have almost three times as much influence on the general voting patterns of their senators as the bottom 25 percent, with even more asymmetrical influence on voting on issues such as minimum wage, civil rights, government spending, and abortion. The preferences of voters in the bottom 20 percent of income brackets have little or no influence on their vote for senator.

Moreover, voters' ability to reason and access information is also a limiting factor. Voters may be constrained by limited information and insufficient knowledge of candidates' policies, leading to their choices being somewhat misguided or not fully considered. People may be swayed more by subjective factors such as emotions, anecdotes, or personal preferences than by objective facts and rational judgment. The academic Bryan Caplan's economic research suggests that the so-called "rational voter" in a democracy is itself a myth: voters are not only fairly ignorant in matters related to politics, but "irrational" in general. Because it costs the individual voter little to subscribe to an ideology, and because he realizes that his vote will not make much difference to the outcome, he will cast his vote in accordance with what he believes to be prejudice, rather than the real interests of society. [3]

To sum up, even if the "will of the people" really exists, there are still some factors in the election process that make the election results not objectively reflect the will of the people. Factors such as the design and operation of the electoral system, the influence of media and public opinion, the role of money, and the rationality and information access capacity of the voters may have a certain degree of deviation from the election results, limiting the true expression of the people's will.

4. Representation of election results

Finally, even in the final result, the result of the election still does not represent the will of the people, that is, the final candidate may not really reflect the will of the people. This view involves two questions: first, whether the will of the people can be truly "represented"; Second, whether the elected politicians or parliamentarians act according to the will of the people. Rousseau once raised a question in his book *The Social Contract*: Can the will of the people be truly "represented"? [4] In the election process, voters express their will through voting, hoping that the elected representatives can represent their interests and wishes. However, elections do not always truly reflect the diverse will of the people. The choice of voters is often affected by the limitation of information and personal bias, and sometimes voters can only choose among limited options, which may lead to the real will of voters cannot be fully reflected. Therefore, there are certain limitations in the representation of the will of the people by the elected candidates.

Second, elected politicians or parliamentarians may not act according to the will of the people, mainly because of the influence of interest groups on the administration of governments and politicians. Politicians or parliamentarians need to enlist the support of voters during the election process, but once elected, they may be influenced and controlled by various interest groups. These interest groups may influence politicians' decisions through donations, lobbying, or other means, diverting them from the will of the people. According to Gallup polling data from October 2017 to October 2019, 64 percent of Americans believe that laws on the sale of firearms should be stricter, [5] but the fact is, over the years, America's gun flood problem has never been meaningful to solve. An important reason is that interest groups in the United States that support gun freedom are blocking the passage of gun control bills or policies in Congress. Compared to pro-gun control interest groups, Interest groups that support gun ownership, such as the National Rifle Association and the Firearms Owners Protection Act, have more money and influence. When these interest groups use their financial resources to fund their own political party candidates in election campaigns, hire lobbyists to engage directly with members of Congress, or place large amounts of advertising in the media to promote their interests, they can shape national policy. The National Rifle Association, for example, spends nearly \$250 million a year on political action committee activities, lobbying and advertising. [6-7]

In addition, the ruling party may also represent the interests of sects more than the interests of the whole. Elections, therefore, do not always ensure that those elected truly represent the will of the people. The choices of voters are affected by information restrictions and personal biases, and the candidates elected are influenced and controlled by interest groups, which makes the election may not fully represent the will of the people in reality. Political scientist Giovanni Sartori, while emphasizing that political parties serve the collective welfare rather than the individual welfare of their competitors, acknowledges that there may well be an overlap with similar sectarianism: "factionalism, in this sense, is a constant temptation in the arrangement of political parties. It is a possible direction that political parties have to face all the time [8]. The sectarian tendency of Western political parties makes them often only represent the interests of a part of the society and magnify the positions and views of some people without considering the whole, so it is easy to tend to political polarization.

5. Summary

Summarizing the main points above, we can draw the following core arguments: First, the unified and objective "will of the people" is controversial and uncertain. Second, the election results may be affected by a variety of factors that cannot objectively reflect the will of the people, such as electoral system bias, media influence, the role of funds and voter information restrictions. Finally, the people elected may not be able to truly represent the will of the people.

In view of the limitations of the democratic election system in today's society, the following methods can be used to improve the election system: to cultivate responsible and rational voters through education: to improve citizens' political literacy and election awareness, and to educate people how to evaluate candidates and policies, so that voters can make more rational choices; Promote economic and educational equality: implement basic economic and social rights, reduce poverty and inequality, and provide equal opportunities and resources for all to ensure that voters' choices better reflect their true will; Promote the direct participation of citizens in political affairs: encourage the public to participate in the political decision-making process and increase people's participation in political decision-making through civic participation, public hearings, etc., in order to directly express their opinions and interests; The shortcomings of electoral democracy are complemented by consultative democracy: Consultative democracy is a mode of decision-making in which consensus is reached through dialogue and consultation. By introducing elements of deliberative democracy, it is possible to involve all stakeholders in policymaking and decision-making, and to integrate all perspectives to better represent the will of the people. To sum up, the improvement of the electoral system needs to address multiple aspects, including education, the economy, social participation, and political decision-making models. Through these improvements, electoral democracy can be better achieved and the will of the people more accurately reflected.

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