

The Travails of Electoral Democracy: a European Perspective

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Abstract

Historical experience offers compelling evidence that elections are fundamental to the creation and sustenance of democracies, but the accepted wisdom has tended to downplay the role of protest vote dynamics in politically and economically stressed environments. Celebrated as the fullest expression of participatory politics during times of political and economic stability, protest voting can potentially unleash noxious social and ideological pressures in ‘stressed democracies’, fragmenting society and polarizing local politics. Democracy’s spiritual home, Europe, which is currently mired in economic depression and political uncertainty, is an instructive case study in identifying and preventing avoidable ballot-created obstacles to political and social stability.

“Democracy is not – and has never been – just about holding an election. It is about establishing the building blocks of democracy, the independence of the judiciary and the rule of law, with the majority prepared to defend the rights of the minority, the freedom of the media, a proper place for the army in society and the development of effective state institutions, political parties and wider civil society. I am not naïve in believing that democracy alone has some magical healing power”.

- David Cameron, British Prime Minister, speaking at the 67th Session of the UN General Assembly, October 2012¹

Innumerable tomes have been written extolling the virtues, if not the practical importance, of electoral democracy. Enlightenment thinkers reasoned that democracy was the result of conflict between losing elites and the victorious citizenry; elections subsequently created and defined democratic institutions. The political economist Joseph Schumpeter believed that free and fair elections were a central dynamic in a democratic government system, as well as its foremost institution. One of Schumpeter’s contemporary analogues, Daron Acemoglu, further argued that elections are the organic fora in which the political majority elites allow citizens to partake in the decision-making process in return for investing in them *de jure* political power, or sovereign legitimacy. Across the political science divide, there is a politely conceded consensus that elections are generally a good thing.

But electoral democracy had a profound design flaw: it was fashioned for economically and ideologically stable societies. Electoral democracy depended on consensus and respect for a metaphorical and amorphous sovereign (“the will of the people”) for its optimal functioning. Carles Boix observed that elite respect for the popular will could only be expected in low-stakes political environments, where parity among political contestants made them more likely to cede power to each other. By this account, throw in an aberrant mixture of political uncertainty and economic fluctuation, and the gears and spokes of electoral democracy would grind to a halt at best, or at worst spin into an unmanageable overdrive that could spectacularly if not violently

unravel any pre-existing advances toward democratic consolidation. Weimar Germany's electoral carnival between 1929-1933 spiralled into exactly that sort of calamity. Russia in 1996 came perilously close to the brink, and some would argue that the counter-intuitive and rapid ascent of Islamist parties in post-revolution Arab states portend confrontation in a region unaccustomed to social conflagration under democratic conditions. Recent history is aflush with other instances where electoral democracy has been its own undoing.

Weimar Germany is an extreme case in point, but the lessons from it are still instructive in 2012. To be sure, whereas fear and a survivalist-nationalist instinct were the overriding causes of voter vacillation in inter-war Germany, the motivations and issues driving ballot box flip-flopping today are trivial and far less existential by comparison – at least in the West, but particularly in Europe, which is undergoing punishing economic and concomitant socio-political upheaval. Modern electoral behavior in most mature democracies revolves around an a la carte miscellany of issues, and mandates to govern are increasingly awarded and rescinded according to candidates' perceived alignment to the concerns and issues *du jour*. The social, economic and political inter-connectedness of the post-war epoch has been responsible for diluting the stakes involved in domestic electoral competition. In some senses, this has allowed electoral democracy to evolve from an often emotionally-charged existentialism to a more benignly temporal punish-and-reward dynamic in which losses are more readily accommodated at both the systemic and individual levels. To such an extent, the advent of this 'protest' brand of electoral competition is, arguably, reflective not so much of a qualitative improvement in domestic politics as it is of the post-war global prosperity that has helped tame the more noxious effects of partisan competition.

Is this a positive evolution? To a certain degree, yes. In times of economic health, the protest vote has been celebrated as the best approximation of public participation in politics. This holds even when a protest vote resembles nothing more than an expression of voter fatigue – the intellectually inexplicable desire to change an adequately functioning government, borne out of aestheticism than any rational compulsion: change merely for change's sake. The protest vote arguably accords with Arend Lijphart's definition of democracies as being governments "whose actions have been in relatively close correspondence with the wishes of relatively many of their citizens"². In times of economic health, we tolerate this commoditization of electoral politics because the prevailing prosperity is able to absorb and neutralize the polarizing venom of electoral frivolity's sting.

Absent these shock absorbers however, the protest vote loses its imputed innocuousness. In an economic downturn, which much of the West is currently experiencing, the protest vote in fact becomes electoral democracy's Achilles heel. Flagging prosperity invites scapegoating, which fragments society and organizes them into rival groups – some espousing violent 'cures' to supposedly long-festered national 'ailments'. Where political community is less robust or consciously endorses particular sides, these divisions become pernicious and differences previously considered immaterial in the national social discourse – race, religion and (recently rehabilitated by the *Occupy* movement) class – are co-opted by agitators as platforms on which to justify exclusionary policies. When these collective frustrations are channelled through the electoral process, without prior filtration through the sieve of political debate, public enquiry and accommodation (Robert Dahl called this necessary process *public contestation* – the presence of rights which not only facilitate political debate, but just as importantly set the acceptable boundaries for such debate³), the ballot box becomes a monster through which raw emotions amplify competing interests beyond any meaningful reconciliation.

The travails of electoral democracy: France, Germany and Greece

Thankfully, this is largely conjecture. Europe today is a bulwark of underlying social and political stability, and its inveterate democracy has proven resilient to divisive demagoguery and the sort of voter mercurialism that the political aspirations of radical politicians depend on. Voter activism in these challenging times would unlikely stir Europe's firm institutional bedrock, but an orchestrated rejection of the continent's organized politics in favor of the disjointed programs of upstart political opportunists could very well erode the cooperative logic of European integration and reopen fault lines long considered safely sealed. The French electorate's discarding of Nicolas Sarkozy may have had a lot to do with their dislike for his brusque temperament and some of his more polemical policy postures, but their decision to replace him with a professed revisionist to Europe's hard-fought financial institutional status quo, and to strengthen the far-right *Front National* in France's legislature at a time of strained inter-ethnic relations, seems borne primarily out of a desire to chasten Sarkozy's UMP party than to reward the *Front National*. If history credits the French voter as being a political cognoscente, then the manner in which the last French presidential election was decided suggests an uncharacteristic disconnect between French voters' immediate "newspaper headline" preferences (punishing the UMP) and their longer-term policy preferences (French economic recovery, more favorable terms in European fiscal deals for France, improved social relations).

Then there are the state-level elections in Germany that ejected Angela Merkel's CDU party from power in Nordrhein-Westphalia, portending a viral pattern that could force the party into a rickety grand coalition with the Social Democrats come federal elections in 2013. Never mind that Berlin stands reviled as Europe's austerity factory: a forced marriage between Germany's two largest parties could paralyze Berlin's political machinery and hinder punctilious and decisive policymaking in the Eurozone's unofficial nerve center. The rebellion seems particularly befuddling when we consider that Germany's projected 3% GDP growth for 2012 and 5.7% unemployment rate top the Eurozone. A raft of electoral results rewarding fringe parties such as the Greens and the Pirate Party, who offer little or no substantive prescriptions for Germany's and (by extension) the Eurozone's troubles, only amplifies the partisan cacophony in the Bundestag without enhancing avenues for constructive deal-making. If these responses stem from nothing more intellectually compelling than mere voter fatigue with Merkel's seven-year rule, then this worryingly suggests the creeping of intuition-based voting (over reason-based voting) into mainstream German politics.

And there is greater urgency in Greece, where an astringent austerity regime has dragged people's daily subsistence into the mainstream political dialog. Greeks' indignation at the state's growing penury warrants empathy, but the wholesale rejection of the established party system for radical and untested voices such as the New Dawn or Syriza, tarnishes Greece's credibility in the eyes of its international benefactors whose payouts even Greece's more radically-inclined appreciate the country desperately needs to remain viable. Commentators and EU policymakers such as Harvard academic Ken Rogoff⁴ and Slovenian finance minister Janez Sustersic⁵ validly posit a Greek euro exit (or sabbatical, as Rogoff suggests) and reinstatement of the drachma as the most Pareto-efficient outcome in the present dismal situation. It has even been argued that using the electoral democratic apparatus as a means of navigating Greece's murky politico-economic reality could prove morally hazardous, particularly after the scare of its May 2012 legislative election (which placed Syriza in a potential government-forming position): many outsiders fear that releasing a bankrupt Greece into the potential custody of economic nationalists or self-avowed xenophobes could unleash insidious and disaffected social forces within Greek society. While such comparisons are opprobrious, the ever-present spectre of Weimar Germany requires any

resolution of the Greek malaise to be determined by the continuing and deepening involvement of EU and international financial assistance, rather than by the “easier” option of domestic political reconfiguration through elections.

Referenda: Regular elections’ safer cousin?

Finally, there is the less formal corollary to the comprehensive general election: the popular referendum. For decades allegorical of the European Union’s deepening economic and political integration, modern European referenda invoke a mixed legacy – at times anti-democratic (Czech Sudetenland 1938, Austria 1938, Belarus 2004), and often divisive (Kosovo 1991, Croatia 1991, Russia 1993, North Kosovo 2012, Latvia 2012). History also reminds us that referenda have tended to operate inversely to conventional elections: the lead-up to a referendum tends to be more disruptive than its immediate aftermath, while the reverse is usually observed in conventional elections as political actors are mobilized in support of and opposition to the official election results, civil society groups are galvanized and political community in general is stratified. Part of the explanation lies in the fact that unlike elections, referenda are issue-determinative rather than power-determinative, which implies that the mechanics of regime transfer and partisan compromise that inform democratization theories do not generally obtain under referenda. By their nature, referenda do not constitute the substance of political power: they merely adjust the contours and boundaries of existing power patterns. Hence even in instances where referenda do carry some power-determinative implications (for instance, to extend the constitutionally permissible term of an incumbent head of government), those in power are often able to influence outcomes by deploying state assets (whether through the suppression of the political opposition, ballot-tampering and the doctoring of election results, or a combination of these).

These characteristics make referenda potentially dangerous in two ways. First, where the state itself is weak or operates in a politically insecure environment, the temptation to defer to “the people” on polarizing issues may be great. Yet, as already mentioned, political insecurity blunts the ability (and in some cases, the willingness) of the political system to effectively mediate and temper divergent expectations in society. Former Greek prime minister George Papandreou’s decision to call a referendum on Greece’s EU debt rescue package in 2011 was therefore rightly retracted: delegating decision-making on an exigent economic policy issue to the electorate, in a patently unsettled national political climate, would have further damaged Athens policymakers’ diminishing menu of opportunities to project authority and political consensus over the country’s dire situation. Second, because referenda are perceived to have less direct bearing on the political constitution of the state, there is greater room for voter experimentalism and referenda may be viewed as ‘safe’ outlets through which to express preferences that straddle the fringes of ideological orthodoxy. Political actors might also be less responsible in framing issues, and may also try to exploit the relative absence of the sorts of corrective mechanisms that attend actual elections (foreign and domestic media scrutiny, the gaze of international civic rights groups, judicial review of poll results and oversight by an independent electoral commission) to indulge in what Jack Snyder terms ‘nationalist mythmaking’⁶. Although burgeoning calls for a Catalan referendum to decide independence from Spain are largely embedded in an economic idiom, it is not implausible to envisage the creeping of destabilizing identity politics into an otherwise politically soluble issue - whether instigated by irredentist Spanish outlets such as the disgraced General José Mena Aguado⁷, or by newly emboldened Catalan secessionists such as the *Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya*⁸.

Thus far from being insulated from the tumults of general electoral competition, the contradictions that underly referenda mean that despite their non-power determinative nature, referenda have potentially destabilizing implications on social organization, which may in turn have implosive social and political effects during proper election cycles.

Conclusion

We should be under no misapprehensions that electoralism is in itself synonymous with democracy: it is not. Electoralism is merely evidence of pre-existing democracy (and here is the proviso) in social environments and institutional architectures that, by their relative stability and prosperity, are fecund for democracy. If this seems like a sweeping Huntingtonian statement, then I counter that it is not that facile. From a survey of Europe in the summer of 2012, we can see that despite the Eurozone's current tribulations, political order and respect for the institutions of the established *status quo* have not been eroded. Even in Greece and Spain, voter activism has not yet actualized Adam Przeworski's belief that democracy's inherent vulnerability to economic crises make it a virtual certainty that democracies would die in the course of such crises⁹. Nonetheless, academics such as Jack Snyder¹⁰, Fareed Zakaria¹¹ and Huntington¹² himself rightly counsel against complacency. Electoral democracy may entail what Herodotus euphemistically termed "the management of all affairs by all people equally", but it also exacts a high degree of voter responsibility and continence – qualities which have been shown to correlate to periods of prosperity and stable social relations. For this reason, Juan Linz rounds on what he calls the "electoralist fallacy": the misguided notion that elections are a necessary ingredient in processes of democratic consolidation in transitional states¹³. After all, if electorates are inclined to feel that their elected politicians and governments have pre-determined expiry or 'use-by' dates, then they may as well espouse similar sentiments for the very democratic systems that ostensibly entitle them to substitute intuition for reason at the ballot box.

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¹ Speech by Prime Minister David Cameron at the General Debate, 67th Session of the UN General Assembly, 1 October 2012. Available at:

<http://papersmart.un.org/ga/sites/papersmart.un.org.ga/files/unitedkingdom-english.pdf>

² Arend Lijphart, *Democracies: Patterns of Majoritarian and Consensus Government in Twenty-one Countries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984)

³ Robert A. Dahl., *Polyarchy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971)

⁴ "Rogoff: Germany Has Been the Winner in the Globalization Process" (20 February 2012), *Der Spiegel*, available at www.spiegel.de/international/business/us-economist-kenneth-rogoff-germany-has-been-the-winner-in-the-globalization-process-a-816071.html

⁵ "Greek Euro Exit Could Be Fast if Needed" (19 May 2012), available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/19/us-greece-exit-slovenia-idUSBRE84I08I20120519>

⁶ Jack Snyder and Karen Ballentine, "Nationalism and the Marketplace of Ideas", in Michael E. Brown, Owen R. Coté, Sean M. Lynn-Jones and Steven E. Miller (Eds.), *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001)

⁷ Ignacio Ramonet, “The Catalan affair”, *Le Monde diplomatique* (February 2006), available at <http://mondediplo.com/2006/02/01spain>

⁸ “The main Catalan nationalist party points towards Catalonia’s independence” (26 March 2012), *Catalan News Agency*, available at <http://www.catalannewsagency.com/news/politics/main-catalan-nationalist-party-points-towards-catalonia%E2%80%99s-independence>

⁹ Adam Przeworski, Michael Alvarez, José A. Cheibub, and Fernando Limongi, *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Material Well-Being in the World: 1950-1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000)

¹⁰ Jack Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000)

¹¹ Fareed Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy” (*Foreign Affairs*, November 1997)

¹² Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968)

¹³ Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996)