Democratic Backsliding and Manipulation in the 21st Century

Centuries ago, Greek philosophers developed the concept of an election; the Romans thereafter learned from the Greek, adopting similar government structures; and today, the United States has become a symbol for democracy through its separation of government along with high participance (over 60%) of national elections. Other western countries also became major polities, cementing democracy after WWII. Though challenged by the fast development of China in many aspects, the democratic structure remains to have steady improvements, especially in critical technological industries. The freedom of thought and involvement of multiple voices allowed new ideas to emerge, along with rapid development. Within the development of political bodies across history, democracies have been critically discussed; and within democracy itself, the most significant symbol seemed to be elections. Although ideally, elections express popular will, due to complicated political situations and the complex nature of humanity, it is challenging for elections to realise their expectations.

In an ideal society, we should embrace democracy, and the crucial way of realizing this goal is through election. An election is the only way to fully reflect all people's opinions or minds, the minorities, the vulnerable groups, etc. Essential elements include universal suffrage (ensure all eligible citizens have the right to vote), transparent electoral processes (clear and accessible procedures, including voter registration, candidate nominations, campaigning, and vote counting, help ensure that the process is fair and free from manipulation, free and fair competition), diverse representation (different ethnicities, genders, socioeconomic backgrounds, and ideologies) and possibly feedback mechanisms (public hearings, surveys, or online platforms).

However, one of the most significant barriers is perhaps the complex status quo. Consistent barriers to entry and gerrymandering, creating unfair advantages, have not only made candidates notorious but also made the election system questionable. Despite the United States being one of the world's most democratic countries, we can hardly say that its elections reflect the people's minds due to wide-scale electoral rigging (Election Fraud and the Myths of American Democracy, 2008). For a long time, the turnout has been meagre, unlike other democracies. Only 50-60% of the population can vote. Moreover, as voting changes over time, fraud changes too. Early instances may be around 1876, within the election that took place in Florida, both the Democratic and Republican parties used a variety of tactics, including violent, economic, and psychological threats, attacking bipartisan voting stations, fake registrations and repetitive voting (Fraud and Intimidation in the Florida Election of 1876, 1964). Later examples involved the 10th Amendment, established in 1791: The policy suggested that the Federal government can exercise only their expressly granted powers but not if that power conflicts with one of the states' reserved powers. This policy may lead to many potential problems in the election process, including a difference in calculation methods between states to create an advantage and a difference in usage or comprehension of implied powers to create differences or space for fraud (The Tenth Amendment Retires, 1941). This is an example of ostensible democracy, just like the Supreme Court's acquiescence in Plessy v Ferguson, which suggests that the legality of racial segregation can be established as long as facilities are "separate but equal" (Supreme Court of the United States. Plessy v. Ferguson. May 18, 1896, 1986). In the early days, racism was still heavy - many Latin Americans or Black Americans were deprived of their right to vote due to misinformed voting locations or times and obstructed at voting stations. Later, when voters used paper votes, buying votes became common. It may take place in forms like giving the voters pre-written tickets, voting

repetitively by jumping from one electoral district to another, or even voting using the names of dead people. The management of the votes was even worse, with administrators using tools to damage votes supporting candidates disliked by the officers in the 1880s, in Chicago (The State's Attorney and the President: The Inside Story of the 1960 Presidential Election in Illinois, 1978). In more recent times, although using computers to vote seemed harder for individuals to affect election results, if one succeeded in hacking the system, the results would be more disastrous. Other common actions of electoral interference may be gerrymandering the borders of voting districts so that a particular party may gain advantage through concentrating supporters in a region or by separating opposers, allowing them to acquire more seats in the parliament with the same percentage of turnout (Gerrymandering and the Future of American Politics, 2013).

Comparatively, in China, especially in rural areas, elections seem only a process to "show democracy" rather than letting the civilians use their vote (The Face of "Grassroots Democracy" in Rural China: Real Versus Cosmetic Elections, 2002). On most occasions, leaders of a particular village are CPC members, less than 5% of the population. Arguably, the voters lack choice. The voting process may be even more corrupted. According to the sample within, over 40% of respondents suggested ticket collection took place door-to-door. This kind of secret ballot leaves a lot of space for unclear actions; people may be swayed to vote for candidates they dislike out of fear or personal considerations when the tickets collectors come knocking; "accidents" could happen during the calculation process, where there may be intentionally abandoned, or replaced votes, which contradicts the intention of a secret ballot, aiming to reduce corruption and inequality. It is a prominent phenomenon: local officers choose candidates, printing out tickets before giving them to civilians. Although the results are made public a few days after ticket collection and

usually the votes are close, voters are commonly blamed when the outcome is always pre-determined (Introduction: Elections and Democracy in Greater China, 2000).

Apart from the effects of complex political fraud and the current political climate, our human nature to want to manipulate election outcomes is almost universal. Band-wagoning means people likely choose the candidates or party that they believe will win. This blindness will lead to irrational decisions; rather than selecting the most beneficial candidate for the individual, the most popular one will probably be supported. The result may not be so beneficial for the voters as they did not look over the substantive proposals; this blind fellowship may lead to a lack of different voices or the loss of democracy's meaning, eventually. People are going to support candidates who polled well pre-election, thinking they have a higher chance of winning. It is the party that is seen to gain seats, not the one seen to be heading for victory, that voters wish to join (Bandwagon effects in British elections, 1885-1910). Voters loved a winner for being a winner, not for being on the favorable end of swings. The voter is more likely to choose based on whether their vote affects the election result rather than voting for ones they authentically support the ideas of. Furthermore, according to this pattern, the bandwagon effect rises and then goes down, rising again until the next election. This is due to the temporary passion of the voters diminishing, which reflects the nature of men, causing people to make irrational choices in unfamiliar elections. This is negative for the development of a country as policies will no longer perpetuate, and rather than building countries into prosperity, the parties will be focusing more on how to continue their lead and how to defeat their opponent; examples may include current day UK and US elections, where politicians are only making short term plans which will affect the upcoming 4-5 years of their term, instead of tackling long term and more severe problems like climate change or immigrants as they consider

which policies will gain the most support from different voter groups. Another similar concept would be Duverger's law, which draws a link between the electoral system and the party system: proportional representation generates electoral conditions that allow for the development of many parties, whereas a plurality system marginalizes other smaller political parties, resulting in the two-party system (Updating Duverger's Law, 1986). Once the band-wagoning effect wears off and people have perhaps experienced unsatisfying events after the election results, it may lead to social unrest or other incidents which threaten individuals and society. During elections, we often see bipartisan media generating news positive to their side and also detrimental to others; once elections are finished, voters may see the news exaggerating the positives and neglecting the negative actions of the new government. More extreme examples may include a complete monopoly of media, where civilians may be occasionally unable to obtain authentic information. In Russia for example, they will support "loyal" media and punish others (Post-Communist Media in Russia, 2014) and enforce social media companies to establish databases within Russia so that they can freely examine and restrict the information people can access online (Web 2.0, Social Media, and the 'New' Media, 2013). From a study done about the effect of polls on election results, polls are likely to solidify the current beliefs of the voters or to change them (Do Polls Reflect Opinions or Do Opinions Reflect Polls? The Impact of Political Polling on Voters' Expectations, Preferences, and Behavior, 1996). For example, if the poll reflected that the ones who voted for the behindhand candidate predicted that the leading candidate would win, a bandwagon effect would occur. One element worth noticing is that the appliance of the result does not take place only in presidential elections but also in smaller-scale elections like mayoral elections. In addition, one critical aspect is that as the number of polls increase, the percentage of informational polls increases too, which may lead to informational misleading.

In conclusion, although ideally an election is the best way to reflect the people's thoughts and goals toward democracy and inclusiveness in society; under today's circumstances, with complicated political issues at play, both within the voting and calculation processes as well as the psychological manipulation of voters that could have been influenced by their online and offline environments or by a politician's inciteful actions or speech, it is impossible for elections to realistically and fully reflect the people's mind.

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