
Elections as Instruments of Democracy

When the War of Independence was terminated and the foundations of the new government were to be laid down, the nation was divided between two opinions — two opinions which are as old as the world and which are perpetually to be met with, under different forms and various names, in all free communities, the one tending to limit, the other to extend indefinitely, the power of the people.

— Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America [1835]

This book is an empirical study of elections. It examines elections in twenty democracies over the past twenty-five years — about 155 elections in all. Unlike most election studies, it is not concerned with explaining who won. It is a study of the roles that competitive elections can play in giving citizens influence over policymakers. It is a study of elections as instruments of democracy.¹

This work is explicitly driven by a normative concern: the claim of democracies to be governments in which the people participate in policy making. In political systems with many people, such as modern nations, government “by the people” must for the most part be indirect.² The people participate primarily by choosing policymakers in competitive elections.³ Such elections are instruments of democracy to the degree that they give the people influence over policy making. The normative assumption that runs through this book is that
such citizen influence is a good thing, that elections should not only provide symbolic reassurance, but also genuinely serve as instruments of democracy.

Elections are not the only instruments of democracy. They must be helped by other organizations and by rules that encourage communication and cooperation. But elections seem to be the critical democratic instruments. They claim to establish connections that compel or greatly encourage the policymakers to pay attention to citizens. There is a widespread consensus that the presence of competitive elections, more than any other feature, identifies a contemporary nation-state as a democratic political system.

The apparent consensus that elections are significant conceals deep disagreements about whether and how they serve to link citizens to policymakers. These disagreements are partially normative; they reflect different ideals of the relationship between citizens and policymakers. They are partially conceptual, reflecting different understandings of how the preferences of citizens can be aggregated. They are partially empirical, grounded in alternative theories about what kinds of institutional arrangements will best serve to link the people and their representatives.

Following a familiar tradition in comparative analysis, I group the approaches to elections and democracy into two great camps: majoritarian and proportional. These are the contemporary expressions of Tocqueville's "two opinions which are as old as the world," quoted above in the epigraph. Majoritarianism tries to use elections to bring the power of the people directly to bear on policymakers. Proportionalism establishes an alternative, positive democratic ideal, rather than just "limiting" majorities, a goal which can be (and has been) espoused by those who are opposed to democracy as well as by those sympathetic to its fundamental aims.

This comfortable language oversimplifies many complex arguments and distinctions, including the roles of electoral laws and policy-making constraints. But it captures some very fundamental assumptions and their implications. Moreover, as we shall see in the next chapter, the two primary types of constitutional designs in contemporary democracies can be understood as having election rules and policy-making rules that reflect either the majoritarian or proportional vision. In the analysis to come I shall try to identify the contrasting elements in the visions and to test their empirical expectations against performance in real elections.

Democratic Visions of Citizens and Policymakers: Concentrated or Dispersed Power?

In writing this book I was (naively) surprised to discover how hard it is to use consistent language about the empirical claim of competitive elections
to be instruments of democracy. I was torn between the formulation that elections enabled citizens to control policymakers and the formulation that elections enabled citizens to influence policymakers. Initially, I thought that the difference was one of magnitude—that control was a claim of greater effect, while influence implied a lesser effect. After much wrestling with the whole array of associated concepts, I have come to think that the language points to a more fundamental divergence in conception of the processes linking citizens and policymakers.

I shall refer to this divergence in conception as involving two visions of elections as instruments of democracy. Each unites a distinctive image of the electorate, a closely associated normative concept of appropriate citizen influence, and an empirical model of the working of electoral and legislative institutions. These constitute ways of looking at election processes as well as theories about how those processes work in practice. In a shorthand that is generally consistent with recent usage in the empirical literature, I refer to these as majoritarian and proportional visions of elections and democracy.

The language of elections as instruments of control seems to be associated with a vision of concentrated policy-making power whose exercise can be made the target of citizen action. The elected officeholders are able to make and implement policies. Responsibility for policy is obvious to everyone. From one perspective the citizens use elections to choose between prospective teams of policymakers. From another perspective the citizens use elections to reward or punish the incumbents. While there are some very important disparities between the forward- and backward-looking views, they both presume concentrated policy-making power exercised by officials who are the objects of citizen electoral behavior. In the use of elections to control these powerful policymakers, it is the citizen majority that should, normatively, prevail over a minority who supports the opposition. It is the domination of the majority that gives such a vision its status as a democracy. In Tocqueville’s words, “The very essence of democratic government consists in the absolute sovereignty of the majority” ([1835] 1945, 264). Hence, the term majoritarian to refer to this vision.

In the majoritarian vision of citizen control, concentrated policy-making power is not undesirable. In fact, concentrated power is necessary, although not sufficient, for citizen control. If power is dispersed among officials, offices, and issues, then policy making must be the outcome of complex bargaining between winners and losers, ins and outs. As a result of such dispersion, retrospective responsibility can be difficult to pinpoint, and elections may bear only a tenuous relation to the formation of winning policy coalitions. The directness and clarity of the connections that make this vision attractive depend on concentrated political power that citizens can control.
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On the other hand, the language of elections as instruments of citizen influence is more often associated with a vision of dispersed policy-making power. In this vision elections play a more indirect role in policy making. The essence of the vision is that the election brings representative agents of all the factions in the society into the policy-making arena. These agents then bargain with each other in a flexible and accommodative fashion. The concentrated, majoritarian approach views elections as mechanisms for tight control, with election outcomes determining directly the makeup of the policymakers who will make all policies between elections. The dispersed influence counterpart emphasizes the representation of all points of view brought into an arena of shifting policy coalitions.⁸

Two important arguments underlie the claim of the proportional influence vision.⁹ They offer related but conceptually distinct reasons for dispersing power among representatives of all groups:

1. Elections are clumsy instruments. The intersection of party offerings, citizen choices, and election rules is complex. Many kinds of distortions may intervene between citizen preference and electoral victory. The heated rhetoric of election campaigns may make it difficult to locate the true majority position. Thus, using elections as a one-stage device for concentrating political power is hazardous (especially given the rules used in practice in most majoritarian systems). It is safer to elect a legislature of representatives and let these representatives bargain to find the most preferred policy. This argument is essentially an empirical challenge to the working of majoritarian institutions in practice. In chapters 6 and 8 I shall test its validity.

2. In a democracy the preferences of all citizens, not just an electoral majority, should be taken into account in the making of policies.¹⁰ Even if they represent the citizen majority position on all the issues, a majority of representatives should not ride roughshod over the preferences (especially if intense) of the minority. The best guarantee that the majority will take account of minority preferences is to give the minority some valuable policy-making power (by consensual policy-making rules, regional governments, checks and balances across institutions, and so on). As John Stuart Mill argued, “Human beings are only secure from evil at the hands of others in proportion as they have the power of being, and are, self-protecting” ([1861] 1958, 43).¹¹ If one accepts its assumptions, this argument requires a different democratic connection, a different standard of democratic performance, from that of the majoritarian or concentrated power vision.¹²

I shall explore various implications of these visions later in the book. At this point I want only to emphasize the presence of these quite disparate general