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Why Bother With Elections

?, by Adam Przeworski, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2018, Vii + 141 pp., £12.99 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-50952-660-4

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BOOK REVIEW

Why Bother With Elections?, by Adam Przeworski, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2018, Vii + 141 pp., £12.99 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-50952-660-4

Adam Przeworski expertly navigates the question of the value added of elections. His ability to weave together different topics is impressive, and he frankly yet subtly describes the contradictions of elections as a feature of liberal democracy. Albeit not including the earlier Greek-type elections during the fifth and fourth century BC, Przeworski briefly traces the provenance of elections from the post-18th century United States and French revolutions. He shows that elections quickly spread as an assumed mechanism for authorisation. By 1850, at least 31 independent countries had experienced at least one election, and by 1900 this number had increased to 43. By the end of the First World War, most countries emerging from the war had elected legislatures (p. 17). Such was the impact of elections that even monarchies enabled the election of legislatures on individual suffrage.

The issues that Przeworski raises, such as the frequent elections marred with the electoral domination by ruling elites over the opposition, and the shortchanging of citizens through political acrobatics, are a sad reality but not a new phenomenon. What is different about Przeworski's contribution is the direct way he deals with the elephant in the room: the tendency to make a fetish of elections as an instrument that facilitates the social contract between citizens and the state. The book's title 'Why Bother With Elections?', is the key question that speaks to the procedural and integrity issues as well as the substantive function of elections. He asks critical questions, including who can be elected, who does the electing, what is inherent in elections, whether elected government decisions are rational, and whether elections are an effective instrument of control over governments.

To tackle these questions, Przeworski structures his treatise into themes: electing a government, protecting property, jockeying for partisan advantages, rationality, representation, accountability and control over governments, economic and social equality, and civil peace. These themes are interwoven throughout the two main parts of the book, namely how elections work, and what elections and can and cannot achieve.

How elections work

In the book's first part, Przeworski interrogates elections as a symbol of self-government and parliaments as vanguards of people's interests and a quest for economic emancipation. He finds no guarantee that parliaments will serve their constituents' interest. He argues that using political rights to pursue social and economic equality is flawed because attaining such rights was never accompanied by power, and the issues people vote for carry more value than the issue of who votes. He highlights the primacy of the right to property ownership over the right to vote. Indeed, if the right to vote superseded the right to property ownership, there would not be the thorny issue of the ownership of land and property in a context such as South Africa, where the majority attained the right to vote only in 1994. The realisation of equally critical socio-economic rights remains elusive for most voters.

The author shows that the filtering of the people's voice through a myriad of institutional mechanisms, including indirect elections and public voting, maintains social and economic inequality. Incumbents can manipulate elections through rules about who contests elections,

cumbersome electoral processes, and political party and candidate financing. When manipulation does not work, violence and intimidation become the order of the day. The diversity of identities of opponents who pose a real or perceived threat to the incumbent's victory is also weaponised. The Zambian constitutional amendment by the Frederick Chiluba government in 1996, barring the presidential candidature of anyone whose parents are not Zambians by birth or descent soon after the former President, Kenneth Kauda, announced his candidature, is a case in point.[1]

The book highlights the tension between social and economic inequality and the preservation of property ownership. The political elites live true to the English aphorism 'running with the hares, and hunting with the hounds' because, as Przeworski rightly observes, they often make concessions based on their calculation of the risks inherent under sustained exclusion and the potential for gains from alliances with the excluded. He also questions the perceived centrality of political parties as vehicles for citizens' voice and choice, arguing that, on the contrary, the ruler's voice and choice carry the day. The governing parties use state resources for partisan service delivery projects, especially before elections. They also manipulate elections through constitutional amendments to increase presidential term limits, making elections a curse for some countries.[2]

What elections can and cannot achieve

Przeworski states that elections generate instructions for government policies, reflecting the distribution of popular preferences and minimising widespread dissatisfaction with the election outcome while generating rationality for government decisions. He argues that elections do not assure individual voters' influence, but rather the collective choice of individual wills. Thus, votes, not reason, decide elections. As a result, the decisions of elected governments are not always rational as they are influenced by a variety of norms, interests, and values. However, elections based on a majority rule system optimise the nexus between individual preferences and collective policies, and render the collective decisions rational.

Przeworski argues that elections are ineffective for controlling governments because governments can only be representative if they are not corrupt, provide selfless public service, and have interests that converge with citizens' interests. The politicians' pursuit of divergent interests, goals, interests, and values renders representation problematic. He suggests that accountability can induce representation in two ways: prospectively, through the voters' pre-election policy positions, or retrospectively, when voters punish politicians after elections for failure to meet their expectations. The voters also control the bureaucracy by punishing the government that is supposed to direct it.

The author aptly notes that disgruntlement is often not about the elections themselves, but about the government's poor performance and failure to bring about economic equality. As there is no political equality in the context of economic inequality, participation in politics does not make people equal. Only those with financial muscle can dictate policy, perpetuating economic disparities. Przeworski acknowledges the role of elections in ensuring civil peace. He considers elections a conflict management mechanism because the more frequent the polls, the less likely there is to be violent conflict. Additionally, elections that are contested through multiparty competition significantly reduce conflict, while competitive elections reduce it even more.

In sum, while I concur with Przeworski's general argument, I believe he should have widened the scope of his analysis to include the political economy of elections. He discusses the tension between political rights and socio-economic inequalities, but he does not address the impact of the business of elections and the nexus between business, human rights, and

elections. For example, the profit-driven introduction of election technology is one way in which elections are being used as a business tool, often with little regard for the context of the targeted countries.

Western vendors and donors run a lucrative business supplying election equipment and materials to poorer countries emerging from conflict or those with a history of disputed election results. They recommend adopting technology to enhance election security and integrity, but there is usually not the slightest intimation of the challenges of technology, including infrastructure requirements, vendor locking, the digital divide, maintenance, and software costs. Furthermore, the disparity in technology access between the old and young, the haves and the have-nots, and the largely rural areas and urban settings is another form of filtering that deserves attention. The targeted consumers often also ignore these considerable social and financial costs. Therefore, the political economy question of elections is a pertinent subject that should not be referred to tangentially.

Additionally, when asking why we should bother with elections, we should not only consider election integrity, political rights, and socio-economic equality. Przeworski has ignored the reality in some developing countries, where elections are not always about integrity but also serve patrimonial values. In these contexts, people vote along kingship ties, using elections to fulfil a social purpose. Although this reality does not fit with the conventional notion of the utility of elections, it cannot be taken for granted and deserves more attention. Otherwise, we risk taking a Western approach that is not applicable to all contexts.

Notes

1. James C. McKinley Jr 1997 *Zambia Arrests Former President In Crackdown After Failed Coup*. Online at: https://www.nytimes.com/1997/12/26/world/zambia-arrests-former-president-in-crackdown-after-failed-coup.html. Also see Michael Chawe (June) 2021 *Kenneth Kaunda: Son of Malawian Preacher Who Became Zambia's Liberation Hero*. Online at: https://nation.africa/kenya/news/africa/kenneth-kaunda-son-of-malawian-preacher-who-became-zambia-s-liberation-hero-3441328.
2. Nic Cheeseman and Brian Klaas (2018) label this "election rigging". See Cheeseman, N. & Klaas, B. *How to Rig an Election* (London: Yale University Press, 2018).

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