

The Future of Elections

We live in times shaped by the conviction that periodic ‘free and fair’ elections are the heart and soul of democracy. Since 1945, when only a dozen parliamentary democracies were left on our planet, elections have come to be seen widely as the best way of forming good governments, sometimes even as a ‘timeless’ and non-negotiable feature of political life. Article 21 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in December 1948, famously set the standard: ‘The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage’.

This is the orthodoxy. Yet all’s not well in the house of elections; public fractiousness and political dissent are brewing. There are signs of rising citizen disaffection with mainstream ‘catch-all’ parties accused of failing to be all good things to all voters. Support for populist parties is rising. Experiments with ‘anti-political’,

direct-action social networks are flourishing. In some quarters, voting is judged a worthless waste of time, money and energy. And more than a few democracies are shaped by the Philippines syndrome: a strangely contradictory trend marked by elections that come wrapped in intense media coverage and great public excitement mixed with bitter disappointment about the sidelining of elected governments by big banks, big money and the outsourcing of state functions to cross-border power chains. The feeling that elections are pointless manipulations by the rich and powerful finds its nadir in the whole phenomenon of ‘electoral authoritarianism’ in Russia, China, central Asia and elsewhere: the use by oligarchs of periodic elections as an instrument for consolidating arbitrary power.

Pressured by such developments, the passion and purpose that fuelled the historic post-1789 struggles for ‘one person, one vote’ seem to be dying, or dead. So it comes as an odd surprise that our times are equally marked by organised

refusals to let hollowed-out elections get the upper hand. There are not only signs of renewed interest in making elections 'free and fair'; many efforts are under way to multiply their forms and invest them with new meaning.

The trends take our world of global politics into the future, towards the unknown. Since 1945, a whole new anthropology of electoral practices has taken root in such 'non-Western' contexts as India, Sierra Leone, Bhutan, Taiwan and Iran. The political geography of elections is changing. Global communications enable diaspora voting. National elections are witnessed by regional and global publics. Elections are exported, by force of arms. Voting in cross-border settings is spreading; it now shapes the life of organisations such as the IOC, WTO, European Parliament, Tibetan Administration and the Antarctica Treaty System. Alternative sites of elected and un-elected representation are meanwhile multiplying; monitory democracy gains ground at the expense of old-fashioned parliamentary democracy. The contours of elections are also being reshaped by crowd sourcing, election monitoring, integrity projects and the growth

of micro-parties and 'liquid' party procedures. In more than a few global contexts, efforts to extend votes to the dead and the unborn and to the world of living species and inanimate things are also on the political agenda.

These various attempts to counter feelings of the worthlessness of voting ('elections without democracy') can be interpreted as experiments in breathing new life back into the spirit and substance of elections. They raise fundamental questions of global political importance: in spite of their declining importance in determining who gets what, when and how, do elections with integrity have a future? Do they still matter and, if so, is their rejuvenation, against formidable odds, now among the vital political imperatives of our age? Or are elections slowly losing their grip on democracy? Are they perhaps in terminal decline? Is the universal belief in the universality of 'free and fair' elections a mid-20th-century delusion, a worn-out dogma now urgently in need of replacement by fresh visions and new democratic innovations fit for our times?