

It Can't Happen Here, Has It?

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Adam Przeworski, [Why Bother With Elections?](#) (2018).

This concise and lucid book “is a summary of our current collective understanding of the method by which some societies decide who would govern them....” (P. VIII.) The author is a professor of politics and economics at NYU, and an esteemed authority in the field of political economy. The book could not be timelier: many of us simply cannot understand how elections got us to where we are now. Bafflement can beget both anger and apathy. Much of the collective social-scientific understanding Przeworski relates will be deflating even for those who have already cast aside illusions. Nonetheless, he urges us to keep on bothering.

The book begins with a reminder that “elections are a modern phenomenon.” (P. 13.) The first national legislative election was held in 1788, to the United States Congress. Since then, elections have become an almost universal norm: today, “all but a handful of countries have legislatures elected by universal [qualified] suffrage and chief executives either elected in popular elections or indirectly by elected parliaments.” (P. 17.) The elections boom was accompanied by, and surely to some degree motivated by, the Rousseavian aspiration to reconcile humankind’s innate freedom with the fact that coercive government is here to stay. This yearning for self-government finds its expression in the rituals of popular elections.

Election rituals vary widely in their forms. Przeworski explains the differences between parliamentary, presidential, and “semi-presidential” electoral systems, and between proportional representation and first-past-the-post methods of composing a legislative assembly. The latter rules tend to determine how many political parties are viable: according to “Duverger’s Law,” presidential systems tend to be two-party, and parliamentary systems to be multi-party. The United States is unusual in using first-past-the-post in a presidential system, and unique among presidential systems in its indirect mode of electing presidents. The upshot is the permanent possibility of a divided government in which a legislative majority opposes a president, and the further possibility that such a president lacks the support of a popular plurality even when elected.

Madison wrote, in *Federalist #10*, that “the dangers to the holders of property can not be disguised, if they are undefended against a majority without property,” or even against a majority with less property than it thinks fair. This, Przeworski adds, is one thing on which conservatives and socialists have long agreed. Election systems have been devised in various ways to defang the threat while preserving the myth of *popular*—rather than *propertied*—sovereignty. The obvious expedient of excluding the unpropertied from the franchise has almost disappeared. Over the two and a half centuries of the electoral era, universal adult suffrage has steadily become the norm all across the globe. But economic inequality persists, and increases, even as formal political equality has become the norm. Why?

Various devices, such as indirect rather than direct election of representatives, tend to entrench incumbents and, with them, the status quo. Counter-majoritarian institutions—such as the presidential veto and judicial review— dampen majority power. The historical trend is toward constitutional judicial review and central-bank independence of the electorate. Another device is a super-majoritarian voting requirement, which bicameralism, in effect, is. Przeworski reports an estimate that congressional

legislation needs to have 75% support across the two chambers in order to succeed. (Compare Article V's requirement a valid constitutional amendment must be ratified by that three-quarters of the states.) With caveats, Przeworski offers "a conjecture about the mechanisms that drive this history. Given the extant trenches, those in power make concessions either when they face a foreboding threat from without or when some of them expect to improve their competitive position by finding allies among those currently excluded [and] whenever particular trenches are conquered, the elites find substitutes to protect their interests. These cycles are repeated over and over." (Pp. 45-46.) Przeworski does not mention mass incarceration, penal disenfranchisement, and voter ID laws as instances of these obstacles, but he does note the curious fact that of the modern industrialized nations only the US holds national elections on a workday.

Incumbents win, on average, four times out of five. Rejecting more benign explanations, Przeworski suggests that the advantages of incumbency itself account for their success in getting themselves re-elected. He recounts an experience he had one winter living Chicago, trying to get authorities to free his car from the ice encasing it. Calling the City got no response, so his wife called the Democratic precinct captain. "He was at our door in minutes, pointing out that we had not voted in the last municipal election." (P. 58.) Przeworski instantly gave the expected assurances. Problem solved. Obviously, this anecdote does not itself explain the incumbent advantage. Partisan "clientism" is not so blatant in other US cities; but studies of campaign contributions show that there is an incumbent advantage here, too. Is contribution the reported "pro quo" that indicates an implicit "quid" that the public at large can only guess at?

Przeworski is cautious about the widely held view that money in politics is mainly what stands between us and more representative government: "to date, no consensus has been reached regarding the effectiveness of campaign spending on vote shares." (P. 65.) Nevertheless, he endorses his colleague Ann Harvey's finding that "removal of state limits on campaign financing in the United States led to increased Republican vote shares and the election of more conservative candidates." (P. 66.) But the real problem is structural: "Private ownership of productive resources limits the range of outcomes that can ensue from the democratic process ... crucial economic decisions, those affecting employment and investment, are a private prerogative." (P. 74.) Campaign spending limits don't touch that.

How do democracies and autocracies compare in terms of economic performance? Autocracies tend to occupy the tails of the bell curve: "while the fastest-growing economies tend to be poor autocracies, so are the economic basket cases." (P. 101.) Przeworski reports that at any given level of total output, democracies exhibit higher wages better life-expectancy, and lower economic volatility. But he sees an ominous development in the combination of stagnant median income growth and dramatically increased inequality in the democracies: "the erosion of the belief in intergradational [*sic*] progress may well be historically unprecedented and its political consequences are ominous." (P. 99.) How have elections allowed this to occur?

Assume majority rule is in force, and the distribution of wealth is on the voting agenda. If we assume further that everyone votes according to self-interest and nothing else (i.e., no one cares what her relative share is), the so-called "median-voter theorem" tells us that the resulting distribution of wealth will tend to equate to that of the the voter whose wealth is such that half of the electorate has more and half has less. Thus, "the coexistence of universal suffrage with economic inequality is hard to fathom." (P. 104.) Yet, surprisingly, "at every level of per capita income, the extent of inequality is not lower in democracies than in autocracies." (P. 105.) And he reports the astonishing further fact that although "democratic governments redistribute more income ... as income inequality increases from very low to intermediate levels, ...they redistribute less as inequality increases once it is already high." (P. 105 and Fig. 10.1) In other words, across a range of different democracies, low levels of inequality tend to call forth mitigating efforts to dampen further inequality, but high inequality leads to ever higher inequality.

Dismissing various other explanations, Przeworski concludes that “the main culprit is that people are not politically equal in economically unequal societies” —meaning, in economically unequal “*democratic*” societies. (P. 106) Merely formal political equality does not prevent massive inequality of political influence in conditions of high economic inequality; and as substantive political inequality increases, so too does the economic inequality that begat it: “a vicious circle.” (P. 111.)

Elections neither presuppose, nor do they tend to promote, either political or economic equality. As economic inequality increases, elections do less and less to brake it. Nonetheless, elections make civic peace possible. How is this? Przeworski observes that elections facilitate peaceful transitions of power only if the stakes are not too high for the incumbent. “Just imagine that the ... incumbent fears that if he loses the forthcoming election, he will exit the office through a window.” (P. 49.) Competitive elections presuppose more than tolerating opposition: they also presuppose that the incumbent may relinquish power without anxiety. Ordinary politics must be low-stakes politics, in this sense. Once the election habit has taken hold, it becomes stronger with each cycle. The “outs” know their turn will come and the “ins” know that if turned out they will be allowed to win themselves back in. So long as the populace also retains its faith in “intergradational progress,” the electoral stakes stay manageably low for all, and the election habit strengthens with repetition.

But, as Przeworski indicates, confidence in intergradational progress is eroding in the western democracies. And his analysis suggests a latent dilemma. The opposition, to be genuine, must give voice to discontent; and, to be effective, it must stoke discontent. But the election habit is based on an unspoken promise of amnesty for the incumbent rascal. Otherwise, an incumbent, who faces the prospect of prison for perceived crimes, will self-defensively misuse the incumbent’s advantage to rig (if not abort) the election process. Where amnesty is the norm, as it must be to keep the stakes low, elections can do little to check top-level official corruption and simony, which can be expected ever to increase unless some breaking point exists. On the other hand, once the amnesty norm is breached, elections cease to be the low-stakes affairs that orderly transitions of power presuppose.

Przeworski, in concluding, reassuringly dismisses the possibility of democracy collapsing in wealthy countries where the election habit has taken hold. But he is concerned about “deterioration” —“although we should not be desperate, we should also not be sanguine. Something profound is going on.” (P. 132). Anyone who shares this concern would do well to bother with this illuminating book.

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