

## To What Extent Do Election Results Express the Will of the People

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### Abstract

This review examines whether election results truly express the will of the people in liberal democratic systems. It argues that the results of elections delicately express the will of the people—or the desire to maximize material well-being, happiness, and fulfillment. The review explores political theories that support representative democracy as the optimal form of government for achieving this maximization. It also acknowledges the potential for tyranny of the majority, but contends that representation alleviates this concern. The essay also discusses circumstances where the results of elections deviate from the people's will. Citing examples such as the Greek bailout and the Catalan independence referendum, the effectiveness of representative democracy in maximizing material well-being of the people is proven. Ultimately, the conclusion is drawn that election results can express the will of the people when the electoral system is well-operated and supported by social cohesion, freedom, autonomy, and moderate decentralization of power.

### Introduction

Nearly half a century after the start of “the third wave of Democratization” (Huntington), the expansion of democracy, despite the expectation of continuous democratic gains, has been through challenges. These include what Larry Diamond regards as a “democratic recession” (Diamond). Under such a shifting political climate, the question of whether existing elections—the cornerstone of representative democratic governance designed to “give citizens influence over policymakers” (Powell and Powell Jr.)—express the will of the people warrants significant evaluation.

This essay examines existing liberal democratic electoral systems and the extent to which they express the will of the people. Election results are thus defined by the representatives elected, including policymakers and administrators.

The results of all freely and fairly conducted elections should express the views of the majority or the most number. For fairness and inclusiveness, the term “people” refers to every citizen in the society. Furthermore, the term “will,” according to John Stuart Mill, is where “a person of confirmed virtue or predetermined purpose carries out their purpose without regard for the pleasure they provide them” (Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 238). Thus, “the will of the people” can be defined as the collective determination of all the electorate in a democratic society based upon their considered values rather than their immediate desires.

Aristotle’s famous conclusion that the “highest of all goods achievable by action...is happiness” has formed one of the most prominent foundations of contemporary humanity (Aristotle, Chapter 4). With western-centric globalization, it is arguable that the value of seeking maximized happiness is ingrained in nearly all societies and their citizens. Material well-being is the most direct, objective, and quantifiable approach one can adopt to measure people’s happiness. Therefore, the will of the people can be considered the maximization of material well-being, happiness, and fulfillment.

Given recent inconsistencies between political decisions and public polls, whether elected policy makers express the people’s will has been called into question. Some political

scientists even label “the will of the people” as a, “legal and political fiction” prattled by politicians and “constructed by” the electoral “process” (Balkin). Indeed, knowing what people want at all times seems impossible. However, representative democracies do not give citizens direct determination of governmental policy; instead, they are designed to, “refine and enlarge the public views, by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of the nation” (Madison). Thus, under the condition that elected representatives and their policies are optimal for achieving the ultimate goal of maximizing societal betterment, the majority of election results should express the will of the people.

### **Political Theory**

Political thought leaders have proposed that having elected representatives make political decisions is optimum for producing the greatest good for the people.

Witnessing the direct democracy in Athens, Plato offered a venerable objection to direct democracy. Given that ordinary people tend to be ignorant to matters of the whole society and in favor of policies that serve their pleasure, Plato argues that direct democratic rule is unlikely to succeed. Instead, he champions the rule of “the philosophers,” who base their decisions on knowledgeable reason and an objective search for the greater good (Plato, Book 6). This advocacy supports the essence of election: to have elected politicians express the people's will.

Since there is a lack of justification for gatherings of ordinary people can make ideal policies, Mill supports representative democracies that have elected legislators to produce more beneficial policies (Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, Chapter 4).

Mill considers representative democracy the best form of government due to its promotion of active citizenship and the development of autonomous individuals. He dismisses dictatorship and hereditary aristocracy, as they negatively affect democratic participation and individual well-being (Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, Chapter 3). Tocqueville similarly observes that democratic government “spreads a restive activity through the whole social body, a superabundant force, an energy that never exists without it” (Tocqueville, Book 2 Chapter 7). Empirical evidence validates their observations, supporting that the betterment of society is enhanced following the will of the people.

Taking the massive scale of modern society, the qualification of ordinary citizens, and the positive effect of democratic citizenship into account; representative democracies with elections maximize the people's well-being and express the will of the people.

### **Consideration of the Tyranny of the Majority**

Despite having compelling advantages, democratic rules have an intrinsic shortcoming: the tyranny of the majority, where the majority of citizens naturally prioritize their interests at the expense of minorities. It oppresses the minority groups in manners comparable to those of a tyrant (Mill, *On Liberty*, Chapter 1), causing extensive harm to the people's interest and hindering maximization of material well-being. Therefore, to ensure that the results of elections truly reflect the will of all the people, it is necessary to restrain the tyranny of the majority.

As a result of elections, the tyranny of the majority is alleviated by representation. James Madison explained that “the public voice” pronounced by the elected legislative representatives will be “least likely to be sacrificed to temporary or partial considerations” and “more consonant to the public good than if pronounced by the people themselves, convened for the purpose” (Madison).

Nonetheless, continuously holding only elites in vital positions may result in failures of understanding what legislation and administration can truly maximize the people’s material well-being, resulting in delayed or indirect responses to the people’s will.

Recent populist vote outcomes, such as the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States and the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, demonstrate the power of elections and other instruments of democracy to correct unsatisfying representations (Issacharoff). These outcomes were driven by frustration among large population segments who felt marginalized by the political establishment. They highlight that the people are really in power and serve as a warning to elitists who may have become disconnected from the needs and concerns of the general population. However, it is essential to recognize that the populist movements that drove these outcomes do not reflect the best interests or values of the majority. Therefore, elections and representative democracies are still crucial to ensure all voices are heard, that issues leading to populist movements are addressed, and that the will of the people is represented.

### **The Context in which Results of Elections Do Not Express the Will of the People**

Tocqueville argues that establishing representative democracies in countries where power centralization is deeply ingrained, even when conducted freely and fairly, would lead to a more oppressive form of despotism (Tocqueville, Book 2 Chapter 8). This is because the people are well aware of the might and enticement of tyrannies.

This recognition aligns with the “democratic recession” (Diamond) witnessed in regions with long-existing administrative centralization. Due to the culture and habit of authoritarian rule, once the leaders and factions got elected, they sought to convert their democratic representations into a dictatorship that only considered the interests of a few. Venezuela’s representative democracy, for instance, was put to an end by Hugo Chávez and his successor Nicolás Maduro in under 19 years, resulting in hyperinflation, human rights abuses, and shortages of basic goods (Gamboa). The democratic destruction and meltdowns in Afghanistan, Haiti, and Pakistan are also lively examples. These events show that election results in regions with ingrained administrative centralization hardly benefit society and do not express the will of the people.

### **Empirical Evidence**

Various cases have shown that the results of elections do express the people’s will, as elected representatives and their policies tend to have the best outcome on the overall well-being of their citizens, even when it seemingly fails to represent the people’s will competently.

### **2015 Greek Bailout**

In 2015, the Greek government held a referendum on whether to accept a new bailout package from the European Union and the International Monetary Fund. Greece faced two choices: reject the rescue offer and the accompanying austerity measures and endure a large

capital flight, inflation, and other economic calamities; or agree to another round of austerity measures, further reducing wages and pensions and boosting taxes, with a high possibility of this austerity package eventually improving the Greek economy. The referendum resulted in a majority of Greeks voting against the proposed bailout package (Steinhauser and Fairless).

Three days after declaring “No,” however, the Greeks encountered insurmountable obstacles to living, and the Athens government had to “formally [ask] for a three-year bailout from the eurozone’s rescue fund and [pledge] to start implementing some economic-policy overhauls” (Steinhauser and Fairless). As a result, the Greeks had to endure a bailout agreement with “worse” terms than those that had already been openly rejected by the referendum (Marans and Grim), due to abandoning representative democracy and choosing direct democracy.

Viewing this decision today, a “Yes” to the bailout suggested by the elected representatives would have provided short-term relief, restored confidence in the Greek economy among international creditors, and helped to prevent a complete financial collapse; all at a significantly lower cost. The results of elections have formed a better decision for the material well-being of the citizens.

### ***2017 Catalan Independence Referendum***

In 2017, the Spanish region of Catalonia held an independence referendum, using a law suspended long before by Spain’s Constitutional Court. With less than 50% voter turnout, the referendum declared independence (Giles). The Spanish government declared that this referendum violated the constitution, imposed direct rule on Catalonia, and arrested several pro-independence leaders.

This policy basis and interference decision benefited the Catalan people’s interest, for the consequence of Catalan independence could have been severe. Catalan had a €52 billion debt, or 24% of its GDP, owed to the Spanish government in 2017. Repayment of this debt cast doubt on any independence negotiation, not to mention the striking political and economic uncertainty that had already caused 3,100 businesses to relocate their legal headquarters outside of the province up to the Spanish direct rule (BBC News). The large-scale benefit of this decision is further validated by the 2022 CEO poll statistics that “support for Catalan independence is down to 40.9%”(Keeley).

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the results of elections delicately express the will of the people, for it is the existing system that maximizes material well-being, happiness, and fulfillment of the people. However, to ensure that elections are well operated and truly in fulfillment of their purpose, support is still needed from numerous social foundations and political instruments: social cohesion, the culture of freedom and autonomy, and moderate decentralization of power. By working together to build a more inclusive and equitable society, we can ensure that the results of elections genuinely reflect the will of the people and pave the way for a brighter future for all.

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