DETHRONING ELECTIONS: WHY THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY REQUIRES NEW WAYS OF PICKING LEADERS

MAX KRAHÉ

In our times, elections are near-synonymous with democracy. This is new — and dangerous. Resisting oligarchic drift requires new approaches to picking our political leaders.

Why? By their very nature, elections divide. Not just Team Red from Team Blue or Team Left from Team Right but, more fundamentally, protagonists from the chorus, actors from the spectators, a field of the few from an electorate of the many. All the attention they whip up, all the excitement they generate gets channeled away from the people and onto the candidates who strut on the stage. Their essence, in other words, is distinction (Manin, 1997).

This distinction is not innocent. In drawing it, elections create a hierarchy and call it a demos. Worse, still, is the ethos they create: celebrity culture and subservience, hyperactivity and paralysis, apathy and rage. Counterintuitive as it may sound, elections corrupt democracy.

For most of written history, random selection (also known as sortition) was the default mechanism for filling offices in a democracy (Sintomer, 2023). In Ancient Athens, for example, nearly all offices — legislative, executive, and in the judiciary — were filled by lot.

This was common sense. Aristotle declared "the appointment of magistrates by lot is thought to be democratic, and the election of them oligarchical" (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E./1885, *Politics*, Book IV, chapter 9, 1294b7-9). Two thousand years later, little had changed: in 1748, Montesquieu wrote "choosing by lot is in the nature of democracy; choosing by vote is in the nature of aristocracy" (Montesquieu, 1748/1989, Book 2, chapter 2, p. 13).

Yet today, we conflate democracy with elections. Why? What happened after 1748? How did elections push aside sortition?

To understand this transformation, we must return to the 18th century and the Atlantic Revolutions. These uprisings, and the American and the French Revolutions in particular, were rebellions against absolutism and arbitrary rule. To replace King George III and the ancien régime, however, their leaders chose a system called representative government. This was distinct from and in opposition to democracy (Manin, 1997). Democracy was about equal political power and equality between rulers and the ruled. Representative government was about selecting capable rulers and restraining them through trial by discussion.

Why this choice? Three arguments swayed the revolutionaries. First, leading voices argued that "we should be governed by the best" (Boissy d'Anglas, cited in Van Reybrouk, 2016, p. 59). While they fought against feckless kings, lords, and barons, many of the revolutionaries believed in the existence of a *natural* aristocracy: excellent citizens with superior talent, skills, and knowledge. According to Jefferson and others, these "natural *aristoi*" should steer the ship of state (Jefferson, 1813). Elections would pick them out and put them at the helm. Selection by lot would not.

A second argument was inspired by thinkers like Machiavelli and Hobbes, keen observers of power. Social and economic elites tend to develop political ambitions, too, they noted. Sortition would frustrate those ambitions because it blocks wealth and prestige from translating into office. Elections, in contrast, are won with money and social standing. This turns them into lightning rods, channeling the burning ambitions of elites into law-abiding competition and away from coups or other extra-constitutional schemes.

Finally, many of the revolutionaries were outright skeptical of democracy. James Madison, for example, saw democracies as "spectacles of turbulence and contention, … as short in their lives as they have been

violent in their deaths" (Madison, 1788/2008, p. 52). John Adams exclaimed "There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide" (Adams, 1851, p. 484). Even Rousseau wrote "there is no government as subject to civil wars and intestine turmoil as democratic or popular government" (Rousseau, 1762/1997, Book III, chapter 4, p. 92). These were echoes of old fears: From Plato to Hannah Arendt, a certain kind of philosopher has always worried that democracy degenerates into mob rule. Socrates, after all, was executed by Athenian democracy.

It was not just a fear of instability that predisposed the revolutionaries against democracy. Many of them were rich — and democracy was seen as a direct threat to that wealth. For Madison, democracy was "incompatible with personal security or the rights of property" (Madison, 1788/2008, p. 52). Benjamin Constant, author, politician, and participant in the French Revolution, argued "Property must be in charge or annihilated" (Constant, 1810/2003, Book X, chapter 4, p. 169). Wealthy himself, he favored the former.

The 18th-century revolutionaries were thus doubly skeptical about democracy, fearing its effects on both property and stability. At the same time, they took notice of the egalitarian spirit of their times. This made elections the perfect solution: they involved the many but did not give them power. Even under universal suffrage, it is the few who tend to get elected.

These arguments are not without merit. Democracy does have its dangers. They must not blind us, however, to the anti-democratic spirit of elections.

Yes, elections are meant to select for individual ability, to pick out the "natural *aristoi*." However, even if they did so — and whether they do so in practice remains unclear — individual ability may not be the right selection criterion in the first place. Hélène Landemore and others have shown that, when it comes to collective decision-making, diversity often trumps ability. Especially when the range of problems is wide and unpredictable, as it always is in politics, it is "better to have a group of cognitively diverse people than a group of very smart people who think alike" (Landemore, 2012, p. 103). Collective wisdom beats individual ability.

In practice, moreover, elections select for background, not just skills. In the US, political scientists speak of "White-Collar government"; in the Netherlands, of "Diploma Democracy"; in Germany, of government by

"[n]one of us." Everywhere across the West, the half that does not go to university is largely excluded from elected office.

If the actions of the elected furthered the interests of the excluded, this might be acceptable. But as recent research has shown for the United States (Gilens and Page, 2014) and Germany (Elsässer et al., 2021), they do not. In both countries, the views of those around the median income seem to have no independent impact on which laws are passed or rejected.

In addition to the misrepresentations they produce, it is also the psychology of elections that corrupts our democracies. Instead of fostering deliberation and disinterested choice, as many had hoped for in the 18th century, we now know that elections lead to *apathy*, *pride*, and *rage*: apathy among those who think their votes don't matter; pride among voters on the winning side; rage among the losers.

This is no coincidence: leaders have good reason to stir up these emotions. The problem that leaders face is that individual votes are statistically insignificant. This makes getting their voters to the polls a perennial challenge. To drive up turnout, it is useful to excite the reptilian parts of our brains. This generates energy, to be sure, but energy that quickly shades into pride or rage.

Further, the same leaders often aim to cultivate apathy, to depress opposition turnout among the electorate of their opponents. None other than Angela Merkel was a master of this strategy: Both her most famous election poster, an image of her trade-mark diamond-shaped hand gesture, and her best-known election slogan, "you know me" (*Sie kennen mich*), were bland, apolitical, and aimed at producing "asymmetric demobilization."

In their psychological effects on candidates, elections are problematic, too. Those who lose may feel snubbed. Their ambition, instead of remaining channeled into regime-internal competition, may strike against

1 Asymmetric demobilization was identified in 2009 as a deliberate electoral strategy used by Chancellor Merkel by the economists and political scientists Matthias Jung, Yvonne Schroth, and Andreas Wolf. Since then, the term has entered wide circulation in German political analysis. (Jung, M., Schroth, Y., & Wolf, A. (2009). Regierungswechsel ohne Wechselstimmung. *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 51, 12–19.)

the constitutional order itself — whether on January 6th in Washington or January 8th in Brasília. Just as dangerously, elections can seduce their winners into believing they are better than their competitors or, more insidiously, better than the electorate.

Through this, elections open a void between politicians "above" and voters "below" (Mair, 2013). From below, citizens can feel ignored, belittled, and misled. Voters lose trust in politicians. From above, elected officials begin to think of themselves as different from the electorate, as better educated, more open-minded, morally superior (Van Reybrouk, 2016, p. 10). They start to consider themselves a special breed, willing to work the long evenings, to go the extra mile, to shoulder the heavy responsibility, because — and here we circle back to Aristotle and Montesquieu — nobility obliges (*noblesse oblige*).

When this void grows too wide, the distinction too sharp, the corruption of democracy takes a final turn. "Take back control," the sirens start to sing. But in an election-centric system, even this distress call will be dysfunctional. To maximize electoral rewards, the false tribunes of the people will dismiss diversity, deny the existence of trade-offs, and refuse to abide by the informal norms essential to any system of good government.

Perhaps I am exaggerating. Don't elections tie politicians to their voters, anchoring power among the people? How can we *really* know whether elections corrupt democracy?

Observing the distribution of power is hard. Constitutional forms can be deceiving. In any society there are norms and traditions, informal and extra-political resources, hidden connections and cliques. These affect the real distribution of power, sometimes greatly. One of the hallmarks of true power is the ability to remain invisible, when desired.

To cut through this fog, I propose an analytic shortcut. Assume a fundamental human desire for recognition, i.e., to be recognized as (at least) an equal by others of (at least) equal status. Assume also that this recognition has a material element: wealth and income as rough proxies for recognition. These two assumptions allow an inference from equality of social and material conditions to the "democraticity" of regimes. This inference works because, where social and material conditions are very

unequal, but the desire for recognition is widespread, power must be concentrated. Otherwise those at the receiving end of inequality would use their share of power to obtain the recognition they desire.

This heuristic is not always accurate. Social and material equality can result from natural catastrophes, pandemics, or wars, not just from an equality of political power (Scheidel, 2017). One can also imagine regimes where power *is* equally distributed, but majorities accept social and economic inequality. Stranger things have happened. Nevertheless, this mental shortcut places the burden of proof appropriately: equal societies receive the benefit of the doubt, stratified ones must prove that their democracy is real.

Using this analytical lens and the evidence of social, material, and political inequality across the West today (Elsässer and Schäfer, 2023), I am not convinced that Western election-centric regimes are full democracies today. As Hélène Landemore has said: "many of the regimes we call representative democracies are hardly democracies in the genuine sense of the term"; they "are de facto usurping the term" (Landemore, 2020, p. 19).

Of course, elections are not the sole cause of inequality. Our politics suffer from "aristocratic excess" (Thompson, 2022, p. 185) for other reasons, too. But our elected governments *accept* inequality. Indeed, the economic policies they pursue often further it. *This* reveals the corruption that elections cause.

If elections corrupt democracy, what is to be done? How should we organize our politics instead?

Direct democracy is not the answer. It has a valuable role to play in certain times and places, but attempted at scale, it takes too many evenings and produces too few results. Politics is labor, and this labor should be divided.

How? This is, above all, a matter for experimentation. Experimentation is not just helpful to discover new democratic forms and processes, but also to keep the future open — itself a key feature of a vibrant, meaningful democracy.

An openness to institutional experimentation must be combined with an openness to geographic, ethnic, and wider epistemological diversity. I am a white man familiar with Western Europe and the United States.

My perspective — both on why elections corrupt and on what should be done in response — is limited. Engaging with other perspectives is essential to render experimentation truly democratic.

But experimentation needs to start with something. Drawing on historical experience and contemporary experiments, both in the Global North and the Global South, sortition is an obvious candidate for this (Bagg, 2024). It confers neither special dignity on winners, nor disdain on those who lose. In spirit, as well as in results, sortition is truly egalitarian, genuinely democratic, and, if carefully designed, statistically representative. It is the prime candidate to dethrone elections.

Of course, sortition is not a panacea (Grandjean et al., 2024). Politics is not just about equality and representation. It is also about expertise and accountability, dimensions on which selection by lot scores poorly. Moreover, randomly selected politicians, whether in the legislature or the executive, risk being outsmarted or dominated by lifelong professionals, whether in political parties, the civil service, or in other expert roles.

Which offices should be filled by sortition requires careful thought, ex ante, and clear-eyed evaluation, ex post. Selection by lot could be tempered by scrutiny, either ex post, where those selected must defend their actions after their term ends, or on an ex-ante or ongoing basis, where lottery candidates must present themselves before juries of their peers. Political parties, too, could continue to play important roles, whether in scrutinizing the selected, training them, or linking them and their deliberations to the process of political will-formation in society at large.

In a spirit of experimentation, combinations of sortition and election could be explored. A new bicameralism could be explored, for example, where a sortition chamber co-legislates with an elected chamber. This could suit unitary states, like France or the Philippines, where a sortition chamber need not compete with the need for federal representation.

The arc of history is already bending in this direction. Experimentation is happening from Finland to South Korea, from Brazil to Belgium. What is clear is that sortition cannot succeed as a mere technical-democratic fix. On their face, laws and decrees are nothing but words. Layered on top of inegalitarian societies, the politics of sortition may itself be corrupted, or trigger elite treason. Equally, without the provision of childcare,

appropriate payment for office holders, and limits to wider economic insecurity, sortition itself may become exclusive, open only to those with means.

Democratization and experimentation must therefore extend into the economic sphere, whether through taxation, cooperatives, financial reform, permanent full employment, or commoning. It must also reach into the socio-cultural sphere, for example through practices that develop democratic norms and dispositions, like the art of association, or through amplifying values like faith and courage. Even then, the thorny question remains of whether, once the lottery has spoken, the acceptance of nomination should be voluntary, compulsory, or, most likely, some hybrid of the two. Here, too, experimentation is necessary.

To be successful, the dethroning of elections must be an inclusive project, advanced by broad social movements, not a narrow, technical project, carried by a vanguard or counter-elite alone. None of this is easy. But social, economic, and political change becomes even harder if we misunderstand which parts of our constitutions favor it, and which ones hold it back. Such a misunderstanding surrounds the role and nature of elections today. They are oligarchic, not democratic; corrupting, not constituting democracy. If we want a better future, we should stop worshipping them.

References

Adams, J. (1851). Letter from John Adams to John Taylor, April 15, 1814. In C. F. Adams (Ed.), *The Collected Works of John Adams*, vol. VI. Little and Brown, 1851.

Aristotle. (1885). *Politics* (B. Jowett, Trans.). https://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.4.four.html (Original work published c. 350 B.C.E.)

Bagg, S. (2024). Sortition as Anti-Corruption: Popular Oversight against Elite Capture. *American Journal of Political Science*, 68(1), 93–105.

Constant, B. (2003). *Principles of Politics* (E. Hofmann, Ed.; D. O'Keeffe, Trans.). Liberty Fund. (Original work published 1810)

Elsässer, L., Hense, S., & Schäfer, A. (2021). Not Just Money: Unequal Responsiveness in Egalitarian Democracies. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 28(12), 1890–1908.

Elsässer, L., & Schäfer, A. (2023). Political Inequality in Rich Democracies. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 26, 469–487.

Gilens, M., & Page, B. I. (2014). Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens. *Perspectives on Politics*, 12(3), 564–581.

Grandjean, G. (Ed.). (2024). *Against Sortition?* Imprinte Academic.

Jefferson, T. (1813). Letter from Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, October, 28, 1813, p. 2, Washington, D.C., Library of Congress, Series 1: General Correspondence, 1651–1827, Microfilm Reel: 046. Available online at http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mtj.mtjbib021548

Landemore, H. (2020). *Open Democracy: Reinventing Popular Rule for the Twenty-First Century*. Princeton University Press.

Landemore, H. (2012). *Democratic Reason*. Princeton University Press.

Madison, J. (2008). Federalist 10. The Size and Variety of the Union as a Check on Faction. In A. Hamilton, J. Madison, & J. Jay, *The Federalist Papers* (L. Goldman, Ed.). Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1788)

Mair, P. (2013). *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*. Verso.

Manin, B. (1997). *The Principles of Representative Government*. Cambridge University Press.

Montesquieu. (1989). *The Spirit of the Laws* (M. Cohler, B. C. Miller, & H. S. Stone, Eds.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1748)

Rousseau, J. J. (1997). *The Social Contract* (V. Gourevitch, Ed.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1762)

Sintomer, Y. (2023). *The Government of Chance: Sortition and Democracy from Athens to the Present*. Cambridge University Press.

Van Reybrouck, D. (2016). *Against Elections: The Case for Democracy* (L. Waters, Trans.). Bodley Head.