

# **STATE-CONTROLLED ELECTIONS: WHY THE CHARADE**

**Abdiweli M. Ali, Niagara University**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Some public choice economists and political scientists would argue that the distinction between classical elections, thought as free and competitive, and their unfree and non-competitive variants is of little importance, as both are said to rely on the manipulation of the people's will. At best, elections are relatively free and competitive. Even in the most democratic countries of Western Europe and North America, there are regularly uncontested elections and elections with more or less predictable results where certain candidates have for years had no chance whatsoever of being elected (Tullock, 1987).

Although it is not easy to define an electoral system as democratic simply by looking at the formal requirements of freedom and plurality of parties, the fact remains that there is a wide range of electoral practices in the Western Democracies. Three points constitute the most generally accepted criteria for distinguishing between classical and non-classical elections. They are freedom of voters, competition between candidates, and the effects that the elections have in government policies (Ball, 1977). Freedom of an election is judged by the voter's degree of freedom. It is indicated by the opportunity a voter has to cast his ballot free from external hindrance and to expect his ballot to be counted and reported accurately, even if it goes against the wishes of those in power.

In the criteria of competition, it is reflected through the presence of several candidates for office or, in the case of referenda, through the existence of various options offered to the voters. However, economic and legal limitations make perfect electoral competition unrealistic. The economic limitations favor parties with supporters controlling large amounts of money, thus handicapping groups which are short of such support, and legal limitations may restrict or outlaw extreme right or left wing groups, or autonomist or separatist organization judged to be dangerous to national unity.

The third criteria by which classical and non-classical elections can be distinguished is that, the control of office is normally determined by the outcome of the elections. Replacing office holders by the leaders of the opposition is possible and modifying government policies in a direction more in tune with the wishes of the electorate. The principle of alternating parties in government is the fundamental rule of the elective representative democracy. In authoritarian elections, results do not modify the control of power; power holders claim to stand above parties and electors, and elections provide only, at best, a political barometer, the readings of which don't create any obligations for the government. The rest of the paper is organized as follows:

section 2 discusses the rationality of irrational behavior whereby elections are held even though the outcome is clear to all and in advance. Section 3 models this rationality whereby dictators hold elections and the response of the captive voters. Section 4 concludes and suggests directions for further research.

## **STATE-CONTROLLED ELECTIONS: WHY BOTHER?**

### **The Rationality of Seemingly Irrational Behavior: A Discussion**

Non-competitive elections are not peculiar to authoritarian states alone. Elections in representative democracies are sometimes not the result of an autonomous choice on the part of voters. In the United States, within the bipartisan national party system, non-competitive elections are not rare. In some counties and towns, there is only one-party organization. Also noncompetitive elections don't have the same meaning in a complex industrialized society as they do in a predominantly peasant country, the population of which is largely homogenous and illiterate. They also have a different meaning according to the electoral history of each country. The fact that elections don't have the same meaning when they are without choice is not evidence that they lack any meaning. Instead, it is an indication that their meaning is different. Rulers who don't rely upon elections for their continuance in office can nonetheless use elections to mobilize public opinion and gain the appearance of legitimacy.

If we assume that elections are an opportunity for the citizen to express freely his preference for alternative leadership and program, the question tends to be, why elections at all when the rulers are unlikely to give up their power whatever the outcome. The assumption here is that if there are elections they must have some functions from the point of view of the leadership of the country and some consequences for the political system, and the voters must have some reason to participate in them.

Non-competitive elections provide one of the few occasions when those in power cannot avoid the public formalization of their program and ideological positions, whether real or assumed, and the revelations of their ability to mobilize mass-support. In authoritarian governments, non-competitive elections represent a necessary operation of pressure relief or mass mobilization compelling them to unveil some of their political conceptions. These elections always reveal the ruler's ideology, as well as indicating the type of relations, coercive or participatory, which the governing circles try to have with the population.

The functions of elections can be identified through four categories: Communication, education, legitimation, and internal equilibrium (Niemi and Weisberg, 1988). The communication function of the electoral process normally provides an immediate and solemn occasion for the transmission of orders, explanations and cues from the government to the population. Authoritarian leaders cannot escape the obligation of indulging in politics from time to time but they evidently do it in as directive, massive and unilateral possible. Moreover, the

government of new states where illiteracy, linguistic fragmentation and lack of regular channels are hindrances to easy communication with the people can use electoral campaigns as efficient though occasional means to reach the masses, who cannot be contacted by more permanent means.

The educational function of state-controlled elections is the paradox that, whereas the very exercise of the vote instills in citizens an awareness that they ought to have the ability to influence their rulers, it at the same time hides real inequalities of power through nominal equality at the ballot box. The educational function can change into alienation when elections are manipulated by authoritarian governments to such an extent that they may be considered no more than simple propaganda and for opposition intimidation.

The legitimization function of the state-controlled elections can take two forms: national and international. Elections are signs of good conduct to the outside world. This is true in new states, which pay homage to the former colonial powers in this way. Also internal electoral legitimization is commonly a political resource of the greatest importance in new states whose national unity is still fragile if not fictitious.

Finally, state sponsored elections reflect and influence the distribution of power among the groups that control the government. In regimes where there is no fixed term for elections, holding them is often motivated by the need to give public sanction to the rivalries of the different factions of the elite, by the wish to capture new elements whose support is sought by the rulers, or, in some circumstances by the will of those who govern to weaken the influence of traditional forces such as religious organizations.

## **THE MODEL**

### **The Dictator's Utility Function**

Let us assume that dictators or authoritarian rulers are rational economic persons who have a well-defined utility function. Holding an election entails both a benefit and a cost for the ruler. Let us say that the ruler maximizes the following utility function:

$U = u(C, B)$ , where  $C$  is the cost of holding an election in terms of resources spent on campaigning and mobilization, and  $B$  is the benefit from election in terms of legitimacy, prestige and any other pecuniary and non-pecuniary benefits to the ruler.

$C = c(N)$ ; whereby  $dC/dN > 0$  and  $N$  is the number of voters. The cost of holding elections is a positive function of the number of voters.  $B = b(N)$ ; where  $dB/dN > 0$ . When the government gives no opportunity of freedom of expression of any opposing view, withholding one's vote is the only challenge to their power. This is especially true when abstentions and boycotting elections are on a very large scale and worse if it is concentrated in certain regions or segments of the society. In authoritarian regimes, there is a high risk associated with the loss of political power and that is what makes them expend all the efforts of unilaterally extending their

tenure in office. Actually, the turnout of the election is a signaling device about the political temperature. Once the electorate comes out to vote, they can only vote yes, and in some cases there is no box for a “no” vote at the ballot box. Therefore, a larger turnout accrues benefits to the ruler (Here, we will also assume that the ruler can imperfectly control the voter turnover through bribery, intimidation, etc.).

$U = u(B-C)$ ; where  $B-C$  is the net benefit of an election.  $U = u [B(N) - C(N)]$ , maximizing this with respect to  $N$  gives:

$dU/dN = (dU/dB * dB/dN) - dU/dC * dC/dN = 0$ , solving for this equation results the following:  $(dU/dB * dB/dN) = (dU/dC * dC/dN)$ . This suggests that the authoritarian ruler will hold elections to the extent that the marginal benefit from voter turnout in terms of legitimacy and prestige is equal to the marginal cost in terms of resources spent on voter turnout.

### **The Voter's Dilemma**

It is difficult for voters under authoritarian/totalitarian regimes to express their political preferences when presented with no choice and their votes have no impact on the outcome. In most cases, votes casted against the government or political program are either ignored or used as a screening device of who is for or against the regime. Voting against the government carries a penalty, and since voters are aware of this threat, they hardly cast any negative votes. The only alternative is not to vote. As we mentioned earlier, authoritarian rulers overwhelmingly emphasize achieving extremely high levels of voter turn-out. Although higher turn-out will undoubtedly fulfill the leader's psychological need of massive public support, he will never lose an election either because of votes casted against or even because of a complete rejection of the electoral process.

The following equation characterizes the utility function of the voter.

$V = v(C_{nv} - C_v)$ , where  $C_{nv}$  is the cost associated with not casting a vote or casting the wrong vote.  $C_v$  is the cost of voting including the opportunity cost of going to the polling station. The objective of the voter under totalitarian regimes is to minimize the cost associated with voting and not voting. The cost of not voting results losing benefits such as a government job, or results a jail time, or being labeled anti-government. The decision to vote or not to vote is then determined by  $C_{nv} - C_v$ . If this difference is positive, voters will minimize cost by obeying the ruler and casting the vote, if on the other hand  $C_{nv} - C_v$  is negative, voters will be better off by not bothering to vote. There is no benefit variable in the utility function of the voter. There are no pecuniary or non-pecuniary benefits involved in voting. Voting entails only a cost for the voter.

## CONCLUSION

The central concern of every political system, however its leaders are chosen, is the exercise of political authority. The authority of government reflects two complimentary characteristics: compliance with the basic political laws of the state, and voluntary consent for the institutions of government- that is, the constitutional regime. If the government enjoys popular consent and citizen compliance, it is a fully legitimate authority. If the governors find themselves without full consent and unable to get their subjects to comply with their decrees, then their authority is repudiated.

The choice facing authoritarian regimes is not how to conduct an election, but how to maintain authority. If orderly compliance with their wishes comes first, then they will turn to the civilian bureaucracy, the police, and the army, to make sure that subjects do what is expected of them. To supplement these forces, they may use the mass media and a mobilizing party to disseminate ideology justifying their rule. The control of economic resources can also be used to bribe people to do the government's bidding. By comparison, elections appear of secondary importance in making people loyal citizens. The problem is not so simple, for the most economical way to make people obey government is to have them comply of their own volition. Even though elections are not necessary to change or confirm the rulers of the country, they are nonetheless employed as a part of the complex efforts of rulers in search of popular consent needed to advance their aspirations to a fully legitimate authority. The more consent the authority has, the better its rulers can economize on the use of their limited resources for compelling compliance.

The choice facing citizens is how or whether to vote at all. In a country where elections do not determine who governs, a citizen dissatisfied with government can at best hope to remain in isolation or to rebel. The alternative is to be coerced into doing what the government wants, while nonetheless rejecting his moral consent.

## REFERENCES

- Ball, A.R., *Modern Politics and Government*, McMillan, 1977
- Chaffee, W.A. *The Economics of Violence in Latin America: A Theory of Political Competition*, Praeger, 1992.
- Moore, B. Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, Beacon Press, 1966.
- Niemi, R.G. & H.F. Weisberg, *Controversies in Voting Behavior*, CQ Press, 1988.
- Tullock, G., *Autocracy*, KA Publishing, 1987.

