

# **Elections: The Foundation of Democracy or Political Charade?**

## **An exploratory essay<sup>1</sup>**

Paper for the International conference “Effects of elections in CEE countries on EU governance” organized by CEU and FES (Budapest, 30 November 2015) by Mitja Žagar, Research Councilor at the Institute for Ethnic Studies & Full Professor at the Universities of Ljubljana and of Primorska/Littoral, Koper/Capodistria, Slovenia

Elections and their broader (especially social, political and legal) contexts are popular and often heated topics of public as well as scholarly discussions almost everywhere in the world. People, particularly those interested and/or involved in politics talk about electoral systems and legislation in their respective environments, debate and argue about their impacts on electoral results and political processes. This is not surprising considering the fact that periodic, free and fair elections are declared the necessary condition and foundation of (political) democracy; through elections democratic political systems and their institutions of government are constituted; simultaneously, elections establish legitimacy of political elites and leadership. Traditionally, elections are perceived the most important legitimate political battlefields of existing, traditional and new political parties and (electoral) lists within a specific political framework/environment (local, regional, national and in the case of member-states EU level) that decide to run and compete for power within a specific electoral system. Resulting from political competition in electoral campaigns and based upon the perception and evaluation by the electorate of the current situation, recent political processes, practices and the performance of the government<sup>2</sup> elections reflect and establish the current political balance and political support of different political options; it is believed that particularly in traditional and stable democracies elections are showing the current public support and legitimacy of

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<sup>1</sup> Work in progress, please do not cite without permission.

<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately for the electorate, politicians and political parties know well that voters tend to forget past successes and failures rather quickly. Consequently, rather than worrying about the long-term effects results and impacts of their policies and the actual performance of governments and institutions politicians and officials pay attention to the current public polls and their approval rates.

competing political ideologies, programs and policies. However, recently perceived public images as well as personalities and charisma of political leaders, particularly their appearances in media (electronic ones being the most important these days) seem to have more impact on public support than substantive positions of the politicians and electorate on relevant issues (content based decisions) at a given time.

In stable democracies, elections are seen as a competition between two or a few traditional and relatively stable decisive political (and ideological) options or blocks based upon their political ideologies and programs. However, as mentioned above, in the times of crises and instability, considering the influence of (electronic) media and advertising clips, the public image and charisma of political leaders, candidates and parties, their simplified and often stereotypical slogans of populist policies, among which nationalist ones seem to be particularly popular and influential, might seem the most successful strategies to attract voters, including the undecided ones that might outweigh the importance of substance based and more complex political programs and policies. This conclusion seems to be true also in some post-communist EU member states, where elections rather than being a competition of competing (traditional) political parties, ideologies and programs become opportunities to express dissatisfaction with the present government, coalition or, sometimes, with the traditional politics in general; in such circumstances, the electorate searches for new alternatives that, however, might not meet the expectation of the people. This way we can explain the emergence and electoral success of new parties and political blocks as well as sometimes their rapid demise, when they do not deliver on their electoral promises and do not realize the expectations of their members and followers.<sup>3</sup> Parliamentary early elections in Slovenia of 2011<sup>4</sup> and 2014<sup>5</sup> might be considered cases in point.

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<sup>3</sup> As it was the case with the party Pozitivna Slovenija – Positive Slovenia that was established by the Mayor of the Capital Zoran Janković and his followers just before 2011 parliamentary election. Although it had won the election, it failed to form the government; internal problems and divisions then led to its rapide demise.

<sup>4</sup> See: <http://www.dvk-rs.si/index.php/si/arhiv-drzavni-zbor-rs/leto-2011-predcasne-volitve>

<sup>5</sup> See: <http://www.dvk-rs.si/index.php/si/arhiv-drzavni-zbor-rs/leto-2014-predcasne-volitve>

To be able to speak of developed and functional democracy the people shall be able to actually and actively participate in democratic decision making. In order to consolidate, develop and improve democracy at all levels in all environments, ideally, the electorate should know and be able to understand and evaluate competing political programs, strategies, policies, measures and alternative solutions based on their content and merits, considering particularly their feasibility and expected results and outcomes. In this context it is important to stress the importance of adequate political socialization and particularly (life-long) civic education that shall be considered the preconditions of effective political participation of the people (more precisely of every individual that should be stimulated to participate in concert with other individuals and organized collective political actors). Consequently, adequate political socialization and civic education are the necessary conditions of consolidation of democracy that can ensure also truly free and fair elections.

Political socialization starts early in individual's life and continues throughout his/her life with a number of actors being involved – from parents, the narrower family and immediate surroundings to educational processes and institutions, peers and living environments, media, politicians and public figures, public and particularly educational and political institutions, associations and organizations as well as other relevant individual and collective actors. Civic education, both formal and informal can be considered an important part of political socialization that through learning processes presents and develops information, knowledge and skills necessary for effective democratic political participation and decision making. Usually in this context the role of educational strategies, policies, institutions, processes, programs and courses is stressed – particularly in primary, secondary and tertiary education, where, ideally, civic education should be a part of compulsory curricula. Considering the permanent need to acquire and develop knowledge and skills necessary for effective political participation an adequate strategy of civic education should be based on life-long learning that should be designed and realized as an interactive process that stimulates active participation of all individuals and institutions involved.

Political socialization and civic education should consider and reflect plural, asymmetric and internally diverse makeup and nature of contemporary societies and, in my view, should be based on and aimed at human rights and freedoms (including minority rights), inclusion and integration of all individuals, groups and distinct communities in a certain environment. Above all, they should stimulate active participation and convince the people, more precisely all interested individuals that through democratic political institutions and processes in cooperation and community with others they can realize their interests.

In order to be truly inclusive and open I would suggest that democratic societies should develop and promote active democratic citizenship as the organizing principle that would allow not just citizens, but also all legal residents to actively participate in democratic processes at all levels – from local and national to the EU level. In the context of elections that would require that all legal residents regardless of their citizenship should possess at least active (to vote in elections), but hopefully also passive (to run in elections) electoral right – which in some countries already exists at the local level and is in the EU ensured for the EU citizens in the EU elections (more precisely, in elections of members of European Parliament). I would argue that the broader the electorate and the more inclusive the electoral and political systems the more democratic are respective systems and societies.

Consequently, all efforts shall be made to detect, study and address all problems, factors and elements that might reduce the ability and readiness of the people to participate in democratic political processes as well as to promote and stimulate active participation of all individuals and collective entities in democratic decision making. This is particularly important in electoral process in order to ensure periodic, free and fair elections in all environments and at all levels.

If at the end we try to answer the initial question, it could be said that simultaneously elections are both the foundation of democracy and a charade. Reasons for such a conclusion can be found in the nature of electoral processes and in human psychology. For this reason everything possible should be made to guarantee that elections and electoral processes are not misused

by those, individuals, groups and organizations who want to distort and misuse democracy to realize their partial interests at the expense of the others. Consequently, elections and electoral processes need to be monitored closely and all detected problems and misuses should be made public, while their impact should be closely studied and presented to the public. Considering that democracy is not an ideal system, but that it can be made optimal to serve the needs and interests of the people in specific environments, it is in our best interest to make sure that the process is free, inclusive and fair. In this context we should also observe public discussions on elections, electoral systems and legislation. Often these discussions focus on different electoral systems, their potential consequences and applicability in different environments: Which electoral system would be the best – proportional, first to pass the post or mixed electoral system? For example, in Slovenia all three solutions are being advocated; I, personally, would consider different types of proportional system or certain variances of mixed systems, in certain cases even first to pass the post systems as adequate solutions that can be applied in local, parliamentary or presidential elections. We should be aware that each side in these discussions has different views, goals, interests and desires that condition their positions. In answering this question we should be aware that there is no ideal electoral system and, consequently, we shall search for an optimal one in a given environment in given circumstances at a certain time; usually, the optimal solution is the one that can adopted with the broadest possible political and social consensus in a respective environment.