Toward Democracy
[Eric Hehner]

Introduction

Sir Winston Churchill is often quoted as saying "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others.". By "democracy", he meant election by secret ballot, one person one vote, of representatives who govern a country. This line has been quoted so often that it is now in the category of unquestionable truth. Actually, that's not what Churchill said. He was more careful; he said "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.". He did not declare democracy to be better than all forms, including those unknown to him, and including those not yet invented. New and better forms of government won't be invented if we have conceded their impossibility even before we try.

Our electoral process, and our system of government, have very many serious flaws; these flaws are well known and have been written about and lamented in countless books and newspaper columns. But we never do anything to fix it. In this essay, I begin by listing some of the flaws, and then suggest some alternatives that would alleviate or eliminate these flaws.

Problems

The first problem in the electoral process is that, with a few exceptions, the best people don't run for office. The best people are usually busy with successful careers. Why would they give up their scientific research, or their medical practice, or their engineering company, for a job they may not get, and may lose four years later, and that pays less than their current job? Too often public office is chosen because it has no formal requirements, and it seems to offer power over other people. The exceptions are people with a strong sense of public duty.

If you are a candidate for office, you learn that the more you express your thoughts and opinions, the more votes you lose. You can come out strongly in favor of mom and apple pie, but stay away from anything controversial. Your best hope is to be good looking and sound authoritative. For the latter, it helps to be male and tall. Smiling is good. Your campaign manager will tell you how to stand, how to speak, when to point your finger, and when to laugh. When you must talk about issues, for example in a debate, what you say is less important than how you say it. Most people vote on the way you look and speak. This is so widely recognized that the political commentators spend their time discussing how you look and speak. They can even say, with a straight face, that you've got an image problem, and discuss what you should do to correct your image problem. Not only are the issues forgotten, even the real character of the candidate takes a back seat to the image presented. And we accept that!

Most voters know and care about only a few of the issues, and maybe very little about those. So the campaign gets reduced to a slogan like "stay the course" or "it's time for a change". On the issues you care about, it's difficult to know what's true and what's fake news designed to misinform you. Suppose a conscientious voter has filtered out the fake news and understood the issues, and has found out, as well as the candidates allow, what each candidate thinks about the

issues. On issue A, the voter likes the views of candidate X, not candidate Y. On issue B, the voter likes the views of candidate Y, not candidate X. So who should the voter vote for? Even a conscientious voter, who knows and cares about the issues, and who knows the viewpoints of the candidates, cannot make a sane choice.

The result of an election is a very unrepresentative parliament. Your elected "representative" is male (with 80% probability, as compared to the population's 50% probability), and richer than the average citizen (perhaps because it takes money to get elected?), and a lawyer (with 15% probability, as compared to the population's 0.3% probability).   (These and many other interesting demographic numbers are available from the Public Policy Forum www.ppforum.ca .) Personalities are not measurable, but there is a perception that on average our "representatives" are less honest than the general population (perhaps because the electoral process is corrupting?), not as bright (the brightest people don't run), and hungrier for power than the average person. So how can we expect our "representatives" in parliament to vote the same way the general population would vote?

In parliament, the main job of a representative is to get re-elected. In theory, that should mean doing a good job so people will re-elect you. In practice, it means raising campaign funds, and keeping your private life out of the news. Don't worry about the issues; you vote as you are told by the party whip. Or you vote to reward the special interests who donated to your campaign last time. Either way, it's not democracy.

The prime minister can "prorogue" or suspend parliament. To my horror, Prime Minister Harper did so in 2008 to avoid a vote that would have gone against him, and again in 2009 and 2013 just because he can. Apparently parliament serves the prime minister at his pleasure, and when he is displeased with it, he can rule without it. This is more like dictatorship than democracy.

As examples of how badly our form of democracy works, think of all the horrible people who were elected to power, such as Adolf Hitler in Germany, Bashar al-Assad in Syria, Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe, Marcos in the Philippines, Alberto Fujimori in Peru, Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Donald Trump in the USA. Trump lies with every breath, acts only in his own interest, and bragged about grabbing women's genitals before being elected. Hitler had written his evil plans in a book before being elected. Clearly, democracy as we practice it, isn't working.

Solutions

We can identify two problems that we currently treat as one, and tackle them separately. One is the way we choose our leaders, and the other is how we express our opinions on the issues of the day. Let's take the latter one first.

Expressing our Opinions

We should be voting on issues, not voting for people. If we vote for people, election inevitably becomes a shallow popularity contest. If we vote on issues instead of personalities, the public might become more interested in issues and less interested in personalities.   Real democracy requires the participation of informed people on the issues of the day.

Thanks to modern computing and communications technology, it is easy for a government to maintain a website of currently active issues. Each issue can be well explained, and ask one or

more questions about a voter's opinion on the issue. The answer might be yes or no, or it might be a strength on a 10 point scale, or it might be multiple choice. Some questions might test the voter's knowledge of the issue, so that more weight can be given to the opinions of more knowledgeable voters, and less on the opinions of voters who are misinformed by fake news. The voter answers by clicking the appropriate box(es). Deciding what the issues are will be one of the main tasks of a representative parliament; deciding how to frame the question(s) on an issue will be a task for the parliamentary committee concerned with that issue.

A voter who is interested in voting on a currently active issue can do so at any time. They just need access to the internet; for those few who do not have their own access to the internet, all public libraries provide access. At any time after voting, a voter can change their mind; voting again replaces that voter's previous vote. For this to work, there must be a way to recognize the voter. Ideally, biometric technology would identify the voter, and reduce voting fraud to a negligible level. Less ideally, a password and personal questions can be used, as presently used with banking transactions; that keeps fraud down to the same level as it now is for banking transactions, and possibly lower than it now is for in-person voting at ballot boxes.

An essential part of our democracy is the secrecy of the ballot. Clearly, voting communications must be secure through encryption. The above proposal requires the voting system to keep the identity of the voter attached to their vote for the purpose of changing their vote later. This can also be done through encryption, providing a reasonable, but not perfect, guarantee of secrecy. The small loss in secrecy guarantee is the price for being able to change our votes. Any voter who is unwilling to have their identity attached to their vote can click on the "anonymous" option. Only the fact that they have voted is retained, the secrecy of their ballot is now absolute, and they cannot change their vote on that issue later.

People are generally not equally interested in and knowledgeable about all issues. People are more likely to vote on the issues that interest them, and their vote will be weighted by their degree of knowledge (see the appendix). This is a great improvement over a ballot that combines all issues into a party platform. A vote on an issue in which the voter is not both interested and knowledgeable is a polluting vote, making the results less informative about public opinion.

On any issue, at any time, the voting system provides the current voting results; that means the number of votes cast for each answer. Additionally, it can state the percentages, the means, and standard deviations. These statistics should inform and influence the decisions made by our representatives in parliament. The more directed the vote, and the more informed the voters, the more our representatives are obliged to legislate or act in accordance with the vote.

Choosing our Leaders

I have two suggestions for improving the way we choose our leaders. I'll present them separately, but the best overall solution might be a combination of the two suggestions.

Choosing our Leaders by Merit

Ideally, we should choose our leaders for their qualifications and experience. When corporations choose a CEO or a COO, they don't hold a vote of the stockholders or the employees or the customers; they do not believe that would yield the best result. They convene a small committee, perhaps a board of governors or directors, who read the résumés of applicants, and

interview those applicants who are qualified and experienced enough. They then discuss the merits of these candidates and come to a consensus.

A country is not a company, and it has no board of directors. Instead, it has courts and a public service who run the country more than parliament does. Most law is enacted by judges through their decisions, not by parliament. When parliament creates laws, it is the public service who writes them, and the courts who decide whether they are good laws (parliament-made laws can be struck down by courts). Parliamentarians are supposed to guide the public service, but more often the public service guides the parliamentarians. To a large extent, parliamentarians just get in the way.

This alternative is to let the public service and courts do their job without any parliament. The leaders of the courts and public service are promoted from the ranks based on their qualifications and experience (that is what happens now). These leaders can be directed and controlled, not by representatives of the people, but by all the people, through their votes on issues.

Choosing our Leaders by Lot

The main idea here comes from *a Citizen Legislature* by Ernest Callenbach and Michael Phillips. The way to choose people who will be truly representative of the general population is amazingly easy: just choose them at random. In theory, this is the way we select juries so they will be representative. No election campaigns, no campaign contributors who expect you to represent their special interest, no voting day. The result is representative in every way: by race, by gender, by age, by profession, by income level, by geography, and by every other attribute. Most importantly, the result represents the general population's viewpoint on the issues: those issues known at the time the representatives were chosen, and those issues that arise after the representatives are in office.

There are valid reasons why a person chosen randomly as representative might not serve. Being incarcerated in a prison or mental institution are good reasons for exemption. Being too ill, or having to care for a close relative are good reasons. Having already served as a representative can be used as a reason if the person chosen again does not want to serve again, but that situation should be rare. Being too busy in one's career is not a good reason. In general, if you are chosen, it is your public duty to serve; but you might negotiate a delay if that would be to your advantage.

If parliament has 180 representatives, and we want each representative to serve for 2 years, then one old representative retires and one new representative joins parliament every four days. There are no abrupt mass changes of personnel and consequent changes of policy direction. A tiny branch of the public service called "orientation" explains the duties and responsibilities to each new member of parliament, and answers their ongoing procedural questions throughout their time in parliament.

It is the job of parliamentarians to decide what issues to address, to investigate those issues, to discuss those issues, to frame the questions on the voting website, to set policy, and to legislate. Just what internal structure best facilitates this job is an interesting question that will not be answered here. It certainly does not involve dividing parliamentarians into political parties, creating an adversarial environment, and concentrating all decision-making into very few hands, as is now the case. It may involve electing one among them to preside over parliament as a whole (the "speaker"), several among them to preside over the committees (the "ministers"), and

one among them to speak for the country (the "prime minister"). Or it may involve hiring someone to do each of those tasks. These ministers serve parliament, and parliament can replace them, without a general election.

According to this proposal, a parliamentarian begins their job without obligations to special interest groups who currently contribute to election campaigns. And a parliamentarian is not concerned with re-election, and can devote all their time to the issues facing the country. Among the people selected at random to be parliamentarians, there will be slackers who refuse to do their job, or do a poor job, just as there are now among the people we elect. Also among the people selected at random there will be dishonest people, just as there are now among the people we elect. Perhaps there will be fewer slackers and fewer dishonest people than at present because the general population is more honest and more hard-working than current politicians. I believe that if you give an average person a responsibility, they tend to take it seriously.

Combination

We want representative leaders. And we want qualified leaders. But these two criteria are not compatible. Perhaps we can get the best of both criteria with a combination. There are two possibilities.

We could randomly select two or three new people every four days, and then select the most qualified of those people to be a new parliamentarian. Obviously, defining "qualified" is contentious, and deciding who makes the decision is contentious. Any answer to these questions would probably result in a much better parliament than we have now.

The other possibility is to promote by merit, but inject some randomness into the choice of whom, among the qualified applicants, to promote to the highest levels. The randomness doesn't have the biases, sometimes subconscious, that people have when choosing whom to promote.

from Here to There

I have been talking about parliament. At present, we often use the word "government" to refer to those members of parliament that belong to the party with the most seats, or maybe even to the smaller number of people who have been chosen by the prime minister as ministers. In the proposals of this essay, there are no political parties, so no governing party. Perhaps the word "government" can refer to the larger number of people that includes parliament and the public service.

I expect that most current members of parliament will not see that the proposals in this essay are improvements. Even if they do see the benefit to the country, they also see that it is not in their personal interest to vote themselves out of a job. So why would they vote for this change? The answer is that they should vote themselves an attractive buy-out package. There's some price that makes it worthwhile to them, and that one-time price is worth paying for the enormous benefit to the country for all the years to come.

The Canadian Senate could be used as a trial run. Its members are not elected now; they are mostly old patronage appointments. There is corruption in the Senate, and almost no respect for whatever little work the Senate does. It is often said that the Senate should be either reformed or

abolished. I propose that new Senate members be chosen on merit, or at random, and given meaningful work. We have nothing to lose, and a lot to gain.

Conclusion

Our present electoral system is a very poor vehicle for measuring the public's opinion on issues; it operates more as a personal popularity contest. And the present parliamentary system is a very poor vehicle, sometimes even dysfunctional, for running the country's affairs. We should vote on issues, not on people. If we have a parliament it should be representative of the people's viewpoints. The proposal in this essay is not perfect; there will be laziness and corruption, but possibly less than at present.

The two halves of this proposal, voting and representation, are not bound together; we can adopt either half without the other. But they are related, because the representation half takes away the vote (for people), and the voting half gives it back (for issues).

This essay is far from being a blueprint for change; it is intended as a starting point for discussions.

Appendix

I proposed that the government should maintain a website of currently active issues for the people to vote on, perhaps with some knowledge questions so that votes can be weighted. For each issue, there is a parliamentary committee concerned with that issue. One of the jobs of the committee is to decide on the voting questions for their issue. Here is an example.

Suppose the issue is the question
       Q1 Should we commit troops to help the insurgents in Antarctica?
           (A) yes
           (B) no
It might be accompanied by the knowledge questions
       Q2 The conflict in Antarctica is about (choose all that apply)
           (A) control of the oil production
           (B) religious differences
           (C) the use of genetically modified grains
           (D) none of the above
       Q3 Antarctica is (choose all that apply)
           (A) in Africa
           (B) at the south pole
           (C) on the moon
           (D) none of the above
       Q4 The Antarctican insurgents
           (A) support the Antarctican government
           (B) oppose the Antarctican government
           (C) neither of the above

The committee must decide on the questions, but the committee does not have to decide on the weighting formula. The website asks the questions and records the raw answers. From these answers, different people may want different analyses. Here's one possibility.

A person's vote on the issue is their answer to Q1. Let's give "yes" the numeric value 1, and "no" the numeric value 0. The weight of their vote comes from their answers to Q2, Q3, and Q4. A vote from a perfectly well-informed person has weight 1, and a vote from a complete idiot has weight 0, and most people have a weight somewhere in between.

Each person or group can decide for themselves how they would like to calculate the weight of each vote. Suppose the conflict is mainly about oil, with a secondary religious component to it. Suppose it has nothing to do with genetically modified grain. So we could decide that for Q2,

  answer (A) alone is worth a mark of 1;
  answer (B) alone is worth 0.75;
  answer (A) and (B) is worth 1;
  any answer including either (C) or (D) is worth 0.

For Q3, we could decide that answer (B) alone is worth 1, any other answer is worth 0. Question Q4 is testing whether the voter understands question Q1; we could decide that answer (B) alone is worth 1, any other answer is worth 0.

We could decide that the weight is the average of the marks for the three knowledge questions. Or we could decide that if you get Q4 right, your weight is the average of the marks for Q2 and Q3, and otherwise 0 (because you didn't even understand the question). Or we could make some other decision about how to calculate the weight.

Once the method of calculating the weight is determined, the rest is just calculation. Each vote (which is 0 or 1) is multiplied by its weight (which is a number from 0 to 1 inclusive), these products are added, and that sum is divided by the sum of the weights. The final result is a fraction between 0 and 1. For example, it could be 0.8, which means the population leans heavily toward committing troops to help the insurgents in Antarctica.

other essays