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## A SHORT HISTORY OF THE FUTURE OF ELECTIONS

### **Abstract**

*We live in times shaped by the conviction that periodic 'free and fair' elections are the heart and soul of democracy. Since 1945, when only a dozen parliamentary democracies were left on our planet, elections have come to be seen widely as the best way of forming good governments, sometimes even as a 'timeless' and non-negotiable feature of political life. Article 21 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in December 1948, famously set the standard: 'The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage'.*

*This is the global orthodoxy. Yet all's not well in the house of elections; public fractiousness and political dissent are brewing. There are signs of rising citizen disaffection with mainstream 'catch-all' parties accused of failing to be all good things to all voters. Support for populist parties is rising. Experiments with 'anti-political', direct-action social networks are flourishing. In some quarters, voting is judged a worthless waste of time, money and energy. And more than a few democracies are shaped by what can be called the Philippines syndrome: a strangely contradictory trend marked by elections that come wrapped in intense media coverage and great public excitement mixed with bitter disappointment about the sidelining of elected governments by big banks, big money and the outsourcing of state functions to cross-border power chains. The feeling that elections are pointless manipulations by the rich and powerful finds its nadir in the whole phenomenon of 'electoral despotism' in Russia, China, central Asia and elsewhere: the use by oligarchs of periodic elections as an instrument for consolidating arbitrary power. These trends raise fundamental questions of global political importance: in spite of their declining importance in determining who gets what, when and how, do elections with integrity have a future? Do they still matter and, if so, is their rejuvenation, against formidable odds, now among the vital political imperatives of our age? Or are elections slowly losing their grip on democracy? Are they perhaps in terminal decline, or destructive of the spirit and substance of democracy? Is the universal belief in the universality of 'free and fair' elections a mid-20th-century delusion, a worn-out dogma now urgently in need of replacement by fresh visions and new democratic innovations fit for our times?*

We live in times gripped by the conviction that periodic 'free and fair' elections at the national level are the heart and soul of democracy. The conviction has deep taproots with a remarkable history. In 1945, there were only a dozen representative democracies left on our planet. Since that time, in nearly 90 countries, national elections have come to be seen widely as the best way of forming good governments, sometimes even as a 'timeless' and non-negotiable feature of the good political life. Article 21 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in December 1948, famously set the

standard. After noting that every person ‘has the right to take part in the government of his [sic] country, directly or through freely chosen representatives’, the article states the core principle of self-government: ‘The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures’.

The way of thinking condensed in these few words has been the global orthodoxy for some time: the crowning moment of democracy is widely presumed to be the ‘free and fair’ general election based on the universal franchise of citizens who live within a common territorial state. A simple glance at the history of representative democracy shows that the orthodoxy is time-space contingent; it is by no means either ‘natural’ or an ‘iron law’ of political life<sup>1</sup>. It is the product of a variety of intersecting local and global forces. Most obviously, the orthodoxy draws strength from voters who demand free and fair elections, take part willingly in national elections and who have much to say about why and for whom they vote, or (when it is not compulsory) passionately refuse to cast their ballots. The orthodoxy is nurtured as well by state-level political classes operating through political parties, legislatures, lobby organisations and incumbent governments. Periodic national elections are their bread and butter: sources of funding, access to government administration backed by popular legitimacy. The orthodoxy has additional props, including roving reporters and butterfly journalists who flit from one general election to the next, along the way spreading through ‘breaking news’ headlines the impression among their multi-media audiences that general elections are the alpha and omega, the high-drama moment of democracy. The orthodoxy is equally reinforced by opinion polling agencies. Their efforts to measure voters’ attitudes and opinions using sophisticated algorithms have become big profitable business. And not to be underestimated are the power/knowledge clusters created and serviced during the past generation by political scientists, research funding agencies, pundits and election monitors: all of them have a material interest in keeping alive the orthodox view that national free and fair elections are the defining principle of modern representative democracy.

These multiple forces are mutually reinforcing and their effects are considerable. They have undoubtedly stretched the life span of the originally eighteenth-century view of representative democracy as a novel form of self-government in which citizens elect representatives and parliaments and executives take decisions on their behalf, for a time, until citizens reassert their right of re-electing them, or throwing them from office in a hail of harsh words and paper and electronic bullets<sup>2</sup>. It should be noted that the same forces have simultaneously had silencing effects: the orthodoxy typically says nothing about the dark side of the coming of elections in the post-1945 period (think for a moment of the link between ‘free and fair elections’ and the atomic bombing of Japan) and it speaks little or nothing about the widespread *failure* of free and fair elections to

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<sup>1</sup> See my account of the strangely disparate origins of ballot, elector, poll, vote and other family member terms in the introduction to *The Life and Death of Democracy*, London and New York NY: Norton, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> S. Alonso-J. Keane-W. Merkel (eds.), *The Future of Representative Democracy*, Cambridge-New York NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

take root in national soils since 1945<sup>3</sup>. The majority of the world's population today lives in polities where there are no 'free and fair elections', yet the failure is usually attributed to the 'backward' or 'deficient' conditions prevailing within the given country, or it is greeted with silence, despite the fact that the most consequential election failure of the past generation, the ill-fated elections of 1947-1948 in the Republic of China, then the world's largest experiment in electoral democracy, helped pave the way after 1949 for a globally powerful one-party state shaped until this day by its active *refusal* to hold general elections. The silence about election failures in China, the new global player shaping the course of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is especially telling. It suggests that the orthodoxy secretly harbours an unexplained dogma: the quiet presumption that history is on the side of general elections, a teleology that in turn nurtures the powerful conviction that democracy is essentially reducible to elections, so that wherever free and fair elections are absent a country will be ranked poorly by democracy barometers, freedom scorecards and election monitoring agencies, possibly even targeted by IMF-type economic sanctions or American-led military intervention, as happened during the past decade in Iraq and Afghanistan, where the staging of general elections was considered (disastrously, it turned out) a first step on the highroad to democracy.

### 1. *The Orthodoxy: Doubts*

This is the post-1945 consensus. The world remains in its grip, yet there are signs that this reining orthodoxy is beginning to crumble. All's not well in the house of national elections. Its rock-solid certainty is crumbling. Doubts about the central importance, legitimacy and efficacy of general elections are growing. Questions about why they are so taken-for-granted and why they are at the centre of ordinary political habits are being tabled. Why is this so?

A variety of long-term counter-pressures is arguably eroding the common sense view that periodic elections are the central steering mechanism of democratic states. The most obvious trend is *the disenchantment [Entzauberung] of elections*. When examining the history of modern elections, stretching back into the eighteenth century, it is hard to recapture the blood, sweat and tears that were invested in the historic life-and-death struggles for 'one person, one vote'. The universal franchise was the great animator of early modern democratic politics. Reasoned books made a detailed case for the parliamentary road to democracy, as Eduard Bernstein did during controversies triggered by the Prussian state elections in 1893, by hotly criticising August Bebel and other defenders of the revolutionary strategy of *attentisme*, the retreat into political isolationism while awaiting the collapse of the capitalist order<sup>4</sup>. Passionate tracts and thrilling poems (think of Walt Whitman's *Election Day, November 1884*) were written in its honour. The universal franchise aroused great expectations of uncorrupted and affordable government,

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<sup>3</sup> P. Norris, *Why elections fail*, Cambridge-New York NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> E. Bernstein, *Die Voraussetzungen des Sozialismus und die Aufgaben der Sozialdemokratie*, Stuttgart: Dietz, 1899.

political equality, social dignity and even the collective harmony of a classless society.<sup>5</sup> Muriel Matters, Emily Pankhurst and other suffragettes were among those who predicted it would bring about the end of militarism. “The ballot is as essential to democracy as the bayonet is to despotism”, wrote the American socialist publisher and activist Walter Thomas Mills. “Majority rule is the only rational method of administering the affairs of a free state. The elective franchise must be universal. It must be given on equal terms to all who share in the advantages and bear the responsibilities of living within the borders of such a state”<sup>6</sup>.

The radical vision of the universal franchise often seemed utopian, but its champions thought otherwise. They saw its practical relevance confirmed by the snap and snarl it aroused. Nineteenth-century Cornell University president Andrew White warned that most potential voters were “not alive even to their own most direct interests” and warned that the universal franchise would hand power to “a crowd of illiterate peasants, freshly raked from Irish bogs, or Bohemian mines, or Italian robber nests”.<sup>7</sup> Mobilising the language of hostility to foreigners, women, the lower class and inferior races, Charles Francis Adams Jr., the grandson of John Quincy Adams and great-grandson of John Adams, similarly cautioned that in the American context “universal suffrage can only mean in plain English the government of ignorance and vice – it means a European, and especially Celtic, proletariat on the Atlantic coast, an African proletariat on the shores of the Gulf, and a Chinese proletariat on the Pacific”<sup>8</sup>. On the other side of the Atlantic, Henry Sumner Maine’s insistence that the one-person, one-vote principle was in practice a drag on modern progress was widely cited. “Universal suffrage”, he wrote, “would certainly have prohibited the spinning-jenny and the power-loom. It would certainly have forbidden the threshing-machine. It would have prevented the adoption of the Gregorian Calendar; and it would have restored the Stuarts”<sup>9</sup>.

During the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, as we know, this sort of hostile, near-hysterical language disappeared from political life. The virulent opposition to the universal franchise was politically defused and defeated. With important contemporary exceptions (China, Brunei, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman, Vatican) universal acceptance and praise of the principle of one-person, one-vote principle became a reality. Omnocracy, the rule of everyone living and voting within the boundaries of a territorial state, became the acceptable and highly-praised norm. But the change had a will-o’-the-wisp quality. When seen in historical terms, the great democratic victory for the universal franchise has proven to be a mixed blessing. In retrospect, we can see more clearly that among its unintended consequences is the dissipation of the

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<sup>5</sup> The 19<sup>th</sup>-century French struggles for the universal franchise and their phantasm of a society without divisions is analysed by P. Rosanvallon, “The Republic of Universal Suffrage”, in Id., *Democracy Past and Future*, New York NY: Columbia University Press, 2006: 98-114.

<sup>6</sup> W.Th. Mills, *Democracy or Despotism*, Berkeley CA: The International School of Social Economy, 1916: 61.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in T. Golway, *Machine Made: Tammany Hall and the Creation of Modern American Politics*, New York NY: Liveright, 2014: 106.

<sup>8</sup> A. Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States*, New York NY: Basic Books, 2001: 98.

<sup>9</sup> H. Sumner Maine, *Popular Government*, London: Holt, 1886: 36.

energy, purpose and poetry that fuelled the historic post-1789 struggles for ‘one person, one vote’. From time to time, elections still come wrapped in public excitement, but the euphoria is nowadays mixed with voter grumbling, disappointment, cynical disaffection and outright hostility to the cumbersome and costly machinery of elections. The coming of the universal franchise has brought a healthy dose of realism to the shared symbolic significance of elections and the fruits they can yield. In the early years after 1945, there were moments when elections seemed to come wrapped in a metaphysical or semi-religious aura. Italo Calvino’s *La giornata d’uno scrutatore* (1963) noted how elections resembled an “assemblage of afflicted people” called “to testify against the ambition of human forces”. The act of voting was “modelled on prayer”, a ritual or “a kind of religious rite” centred on “the acceptance of human smallness, adding one’s own nothingness to the sum in which all losses are cancelled out, assenting to a final, unknown end”<sup>10</sup>. Compare Calvino’s account of the solemnity of elections in post-fascist Italy with José Saramago’s thoroughly de-sanctified, down-to-earth description of an extreme case of their fading spirit: a sunny election day when a huge majority (83%) of voters refuse to go to the polling stations until late afternoon, to cast a blank ballot, in silent protest against the perceived worthlessness of voting. The choice by the majority to exercise their “simple right not to follow any consensually established opinion” breeds official outbursts. A cabinet minister calls the electoral blank-out “a depth charge launched against the system”. The government panics. Denouncing the “blind casting of blank ballot papers”, it warns the country is facing a terrorist threat. A state of emergency is declared; the secret police spring into action; house searches begin; tensions rise; bombs explode; people are killed, leaving the former democracy to descend into an awful darkness<sup>11</sup>.

The fading aura of the orthodox belief in elections as the lynchpin of democracy is reinforced by an additional challenge: the feeling that citizens can act more effectively outside and beyond elections and the election cycles so praised by textbook treatments of representative democracy. The dynamic prompts new questions: Now that the principle of the universal franchise (‘who is entitled to vote?’) has become more or less a settled issue, is it just possible that a fundamental political challenge facing so-called democracies is *where* people can vote? Might the new measure of democracy be the number of different places where people can decide things by exercising their vote directly, or through their representatives<sup>12</sup>?

These questions have been brought to life by *the redistribution of political passions* to zones of power beyond the reach of political parties and parliaments and the rhythms of national election cycles. The disaffection of minorities who refuse the ‘majority rule’ principle of electoral democracy (the opening shots were fired by the civil rights movement in the United States, in the early 1950s) is just one of the many drivers within a much broader but still unfinished *transformation of the ecology of democratic representation*. The rapid growth of public scrutiny and power-checking bodies is a striking feature of the post-1945 political landscape. A multitude of monitory mechanisms, or ‘parliaments of

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<sup>10</sup> I. Calvino, *The Watcher and Other Stories*, New York NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971: 36-37.

<sup>11</sup> J. Saramago, *Seeing*, London: Harvest Books, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> N. Bobbio, *The Future of Democracy: A Defence of the Rules of the Game*, Engl. transl. R. Griffin, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987.

things', that operate well beyond the fringes of mainstream elections, is transforming the architecture of self-government. Gone are the days when democracy could be described (and in the next breath attacked) as "government by the unrestricted will of the majority" (von Hayek)<sup>13</sup>. Democracy is coming to mean much more than free and fair general elections, although nothing less. The principles of democratic accountability and public participation are applied to a wide range of settings; there is a growing awareness that "parliaments are only a few of the machineries of representation among many others and not necessarily the most relevant or the best equipped"<sup>14</sup>. The age of *monitory democracy* has been born<sup>15</sup>. The grip of elections, political parties and parliaments on citizens' lives is consequently weakening. Bodies such as Human Rights Watch, Greenpeace, Oxfam, WikiLeaks and I Paid a Bribe are among the new power-scrutinising and power-restraining innovations that tend to enfranchise many more citizens' voices. They do so by establishing alternative sites of legitimate authority, new types of *unelected representatives* skilled at using what Americans call 'bully pulpits'. The number and range of monitory institutions, or 'third party judges'<sup>16</sup>, so greatly increase that they point to a future world where the old rule of 'one person, one vote, one representative' - the central demand in the early modern struggle for representative democracy - is replaced with the new principle of monitory democracy: 'one person, many interests, many voices, many sources of authority, multiple votes, multiple representatives'.

The sidelining and downgrading of national elections is bound up with the unfinished communications revolution. *Communicative abundance* is becoming a fact of life; voters, political parties, parliaments and elections are nowadays staged within and structured by media-saturated settings. Mainstream electoral politics is reshaped by networked devices that integrate texts, sounds and images in digitally compact and easily storable, reproducible and portable form. In this high-pressure world of communicative abundance, political parties and elected governments typically function as political machines operated by professional communicators guided by opinion polls, online surveys, focus groups and the collection and algorithmic processing of big data. Old-style patronage run by party bureaucrats declines; political bosses are replaced by political consultants and data monkeys; and strong party loyalties nurtured by face-to-

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<sup>13</sup> F. von Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty: the Political Order of a Free People*, London-Henley: Routledge & Kegan, 1979: 39.

<sup>14</sup> B. Latour, "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik; or How to Make Things Public", in B. Latour-P. Weibel (eds.), *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, Cambridge MA-London: MIT Press, 2005: 31.

<sup>15</sup> See J. Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy* and Id., *Democracy and Media Decadence*, Cambridge-New York NY: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

<sup>16</sup> P. Pasquino, "Constitutional Adjudication and Democracy. Comparative Perspectives: USA, France, Italy", *Ratio Juris*, 11 (March 1998): 38-50. Pasquino cites the famous letter of James Madison to Thomas Jefferson (October 24, 1787): "We know however that no Society ever did or can consist of so homogeneous mass of Citizens [...] It remains then to be enquired whether a majority having any common interest, or feeling any common passion, will find sufficient motives to restrain them from oppressing the minority. An individual is never allowed to be a judge or even a witness in his own cause. If two individuals are under the bias of interest or enmity against a third, the rights of the latter could never be safely referred to the majority of the three. Will two thousand individuals be less apt to oppress one thousand, or two hundred thousand, one hundred thousand?"

face, locally-based contacts among incumbents, candidates and voters wither. The age when the essence of politics was periodic elections structured by ‘political bosses’ and the “psychotechnics of party management and party advertising, slogans and marching tunes”<sup>17</sup> has passed. Political parties instead become frenzied agents of “the permanent campaign”.<sup>18</sup> Free time between elections is a thing of the past; the pressure to ‘win’ the daily news cycle through headline grabbing, announcements and intensive continuous polling rains down hard on voters (think of the pioneering efforts by pollster Dick Morris to get voters to do such things as help President Bill Clinton decide where he would go on vacation). Every political question is treated as a public relations problem; all electoral opponents (as American politicians say) are potential ‘rope a dope’ victims in perpetual media frenzies.

This drift towards “psephocracy” (Ashis Nandy), a media-saturated polity dominated by election doings and dramas, proves to be a mixed blessing for the reigning orthodoxy. Psephocracy produces large quantities of bellyaching. Communicative abundance fuels rising citizen disaffection with mainstream ‘catch-all’ parties accused of failing to be all good things to all voters; public fractiousness, volatile turnout rates and political resistance spreads.<sup>19</sup> There are contexts in which political parties seem strangely hell-bent on disabling themselves through strategies of ruination. In some quarters, voting is judged a worthless waste of time, money and energy; or elections are treated as pay-back moments by angry citizens. Aphorisms and jokes about politicians, parties and parliaments flood through social media. It’s said that during election campaigns the air is stuffed full of speeches and vice versa. Others say that elections are political happenings when people find out what politicians stand for and politicians find out what people will fall for. Still others ask whether the only reason we have elections is to find out if the polls were accurate. The mischievous add: if the gods had intended people to vote then they would have given us candidates.

Under conditions of communicative abundance, *electoral rebellions* become easier to organise, and more frequent. In these circumstances of communicative abundance, support by disaffected citizens for populist parties flourishes. Cultivating the style of bad manners politics, appealing to ‘the people’, populists and their parties use elections to heap scorn on ‘rigged’ elections said to be dominated by ‘the political establishment’<sup>20</sup>. Public support flourishes as well for new civic initiatives and other experiments with ‘anti-political’, direct-action social networks that know the arts of situationist pranking, *détournement* and staging of global media events<sup>21</sup>. The dramatic *occupation of public squares, buildings and parliaments by citizens* in recent years fits this pattern of extra-parliamentary politics. From Avenue Habib Bourguiba and Tahrir Square to Puerta del Sol, Stuttgart,

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<sup>17</sup> J. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, New York NY-London: Harper & Row, 1942: 283.

<sup>18</sup> S. Blumenthal, *The Permanent Campaign*, Boston MA: Beacon Press, 1980.

<sup>19</sup> P. Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*, London-New York NY: Verso, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> S. Tormey, *The End of Representative Politics*, Cambridge: Polity, 2015; L. Bennett-A. Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics*, Cambridge-New York NY: Cambridge University Press, 2013; B. Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> J. Keane, “War Comes Home”, *The Conversation*, November 15, 2015 (<https://theconversation.com/war-comes-home-50715>).

Wall Street, Bungehuis in Amsterdam, Taipei and Hong Kong, citizens' initiatives are directed *against* elections, political parties, parliaments and the whole paraphernalia of electoral democracy.

The interesting anti-electoral form of these occupations merits closer examination. These public assemblies do not suffer nostalgia for the golden age of classical Athenian assembly democracy, or for the age of representative democracy. They are not straightforward expressions of 'the will of the people'; and they are not to be understood as harbingers of a new model of 'real', 'direct', 'participatory', 'grassroots', 'deep' or 'deliberative' democracy. The new public assemblies do not yearn for a 'purified' representative democracy based on 'free and fair' elections. They are in fact instances of *monitory democracy* in action. These assemblies function as public syntagma, creative remixes of some old democratic tactics, a democratic innovation that combines the peace vigil, the militant sit-in, the public demonstration, the trade union rally, the teach-in and the constitutional convention. These public occupations of our time are multiplex public spaces where indignant, 'pissed off' citizens gather in solidarity to vent their private angers in the reassuring company of diverse others, from all walks of life. They are public spaces in which the principle of political and social equality is reaffirmed; where diverse voices are heard, on various subjects; sites where the dignity of citizens beyond electoral politics is reclaimed<sup>22</sup>. The public occupations are a form of 'prefigurative politics' where fresh futures are imagined and unborn generations are granted a voice, places where citizens warn that unless something gives citizens of the future will be forced to suffer the annoying dissatisfactions and grinding injustices of the present. These self-styled people's assemblies are equally multi-media broadcast studios. Well beyond the confines of elections and election cycles, they are cries to fellow citizens of a city, a country, a region beyond borders; they are sometimes public appeals to the whole world, to citizens everywhere, to take note of what is happening, to understand how and why their lives and livelihoods are being ruined by arbitrary power. These public spaces are lighthouses, early warning stations, reminders of how easily democracy is destroyed whenever power is exercised arbitrarily, by forces such as global corporations and consortia of states that obey no majorities, no elections, or election outcomes.

Public occupations are examples of how public life within most parliamentary democracies is now pushed and pulled by *rough music politics*, 21<sup>st</sup>-century forms of the early modern protests of the disaffected and excluded. Once upon a time, when the bulk of the populations of Europe and elsewhere did not enjoy voting rights, the poor and powerless expressed their indignation through ritual, revelry and riot. Raucous ear-shattering noise, unpitying laughter and the mimicking of obscenities were the weapons of the weak. In France, such practices were called *charivari* (Italians spoke of *scampanate*; Germans referred to *Katzenmusik*), while in late eighteenth-century Britain the protests paraded under such strangely obsolete names as 'shallals', 'riding the stang' and 'skimmingtons', rowdy parades expressing moral disapproval and featuring effigies of the proxy victims<sup>23</sup>. The rough music politics of our times similarly takes place on the

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<sup>22</sup> D. Graeber, [\*The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement\*](#), London: Allan Lane, 2013.

<sup>23</sup> E.P. Thompson, "Rough Music Reconsidered", *Folklore*, 103 (1/1992): 3-26.

fringes of electoral politics. It comes in the form of protest by the excluded against their exclusion from parliamentary politics; and, just as things were in the eighteenth century, rough music politics is energised by the sharpening sense that elections are no longer meaningful or effective ways of determining fairly who gets what, when and how.

## 2. *Philippines Syndrome*

More than a few democracies are shaped by a strangely contradictory trend first outlined by Benedict Anderson in writings on elections in Southeast Asia. We could call it the *Philippines syndrome*: elections wrapped in intense media coverage and great public excitement and robust turnout rates come mixed with bitter public disappointment and despondency produced by citizens' understanding that elections work chronically in favour of the rich and powerful<sup>24</sup>.

There are multiple symptoms of this syndrome that now eats away at the reining elections orthodoxy. In all electoral democracies, there are mounting complaints that elections and elected governments have been polluted by *big money*. The United States is the most talked-about case, for worrying reasons<sup>25</sup>. Under the rules confirmed by the *Citizens United* decision by the Supreme Court in 2010, and backed by an appeals court decision later that year, *SpeechNow.org v. Federal Election Commission*, billionaire donors like Alice Walton, Sheldon Adelson and the Koch brothers are now the gatekeepers of high-level politics. The limits on corporate funds in elections going back to Theodore Roosevelt in 1907 have been abolished. Rich oligarchs, many of whom are champions of 'austerity', contribute limitless amounts to Super PACs sporting names such as the Wisconsin Club for Growth and Priorities USA, supposedly independent political action committees that in effect operate as political parties of their own. The whole process of 'slush fund politics' (Bill Allison of the Sunlight Foundation) is deeply corrupting of the spirit and substance of elections. Billionaires distort nomination races; they confuse candidates into thinking they are more popular than they really are and they often artificially prolong the political lives of unpopular candidates. By law, 'substantial discussions' between billionaires and their pet candidates are not supposed to take place, yet the phrase has never been clarified in law, and is rarely applied. Billionaires enjoy close working relations with their preferred candidate. They shape political agendas; and by working, under the tax code, through organisations that are 'operated exclusively to promote social welfare', their big money donations are kept secret. The whole 'dark money' donations process is fiercely partisan, and is unbreakably rock-solid, at least for the moment. Incumbents who have succeeded through big money politics are reluctant to court alternatives. Candidates vying for office swear they need pet billionaires. And

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<sup>24</sup> B. Anderson, "Elections and Participation in Three Southeast Asian Countries", in R.H. Taylor (ed.), *The Politics of Elections in Southeast Asia*, Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson center press, 1996: 12-33; and Id., "Cacique Democracy in the Philippines: Origins and Dreams", *New Left Review*, 169 (1/May-June 1988): 192-226.

<sup>25</sup> R.G. Kaiser, *So Damn Much Money: the Triumph of Lobbying and the Corrosion of American Government*, New York NY: Vintage Books, 2010; E. Drew, "How Money Runs Our Politics", *The New York Review of Books*, June 4, 2015: 22-26.

the whole campaign finance system is in any case protected by law and its presumption that spending money to influence elections is a form of constitutionally protected ‘free speech’.

General elections are further distorted by *organised lobbying*<sup>26</sup>. Practically every democratically elected government nowadays resembles a beehive swarming with lobbyists busily engaged in linking outside interests with government policymakers. The term covers many types of advocacy, from informal open consultations between legislators and tiny not-for-profit associations through to shadowy but well-organised links between regulators and giant global corporations. Around 15,000 trade associations, consultants, not-for-profit NGOs, international organisations, think tanks, regional organisations and other lobbyists currently operate in Brussels, where they seek to shape legislation and regulations of the European Union; and in Washington DC, an estimated 90,000 lobbyists ply their trade within a field dominated by such large lobby firms as Hill and Knowlton, the Duberstein Group and Patton Boggs.

Public defenders of the trend seem unworried. “The practice of lobbying in order to influence political decisions is a legitimate and necessary part of the democratic process,” notes a much-quoted parliamentary report. “Individuals and organisations reasonably want to influence decisions that may affect them, those around them, and their environment. Government in turn needs access to the knowledge and views that lobbying can bring.”<sup>27</sup> Seen in this way, to pursue the simile of the beehive, lobbyists are vital pollinators and honey makers, suppliers of information to government policy makers who might otherwise be ignorant of the needs of stakeholders. Lobbyists line the nests and strengthen the cavity walls of democratic government with propolis. Lobbying is a source of campaign contributions. It provides jobs for outgoing elected officials and their staffs; and it enriches the legislative process by providing it with outside expertise, with ‘legislative subsidy’<sup>28</sup>.

The points are well taken. Lobbying is not simply a synonym for bribery and there are indeed lobbyists who successfully strive to protect the weak, or who emphasise the importance of following such commandments as avoiding lies, misinformation and exaggerated promises, listening and working with policymakers and providing them with clear-headed proposals<sup>29</sup>. But especially when it draws on big money, lobbying (to extend the beehive simile) introduces poisonous toxins, strange diseases and colony disorders into the heartland nests of elected government. By strengthening the well-organised hand of the wealthy, it distorts election results. Partners within the busy hives of governmental power, lobbyists’ brief is to set policy agendas, ultimately by persuading

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<sup>26</sup> The following section summarises my lengthier account of lobbying in *Democracy and Media Decadence*.

<sup>27</sup> House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee, *Lobbying: Access and influence in Whitehall*. First Report of Session 2008-09, London: House of Commons, 2009 (<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmpublicadm/36/36i.pdf>): 9.

<sup>28</sup> R.L. Hall-A.V. Deardorff, “Lobbying as Legislative Subsidy”, *American Political Science Review*, 100 (2006): 69-84, where lobbying is pictured “not as exchange (vote buying) or persuasion (informative signaling) but as a form of legislative subsidy – a matching grant of policy information, political intelligence, and legislative labor to the enterprises of strategically selected legislators”.

<sup>29</sup> B.C. Wolpe-B.J. Levine, *Lobbying Congress: How the System Works*, Washington DC: CQ Press, 1996: 13-19.

or dissuading legislators or regulators from taking a particular course of action, especially when the issues are big and much is at stake in power terms. Lobbyists typically spend their money, time and energy on a variety of tactics, which divide into two types, the 'outside' and the 'inside'. Using what are called grassroots tactics, 'outside' lobbyists pay great attention to forming public opinion through perpetual media campaigning against their opponents, often through 'sexed up' disinformation<sup>30</sup>. Conventional 'inside' lobbying meanwhile concentrates on striking close links with policy makers within and around official government circles. Influence is the name of the game, for instance through the nurturing of regular personal contacts and friendly working relations with government officials for the purpose of promoting, or amending or blocking legislation. Disregarding elections, lobbyists organise campaign donations, good dinners, corporate boxes, complimentary holidays and media opportunities. They operate a media-intensive 'gift economy' of influential connections lubricated by cash flows. Within and around the institutions of government, the ultimate purpose of lobbying is to secure or strengthen the power of some interests against other, potentially opposing and conflicting interests, and to do so by building connections, regardless of the outcome of elections, or the composition of the existing government.

An equally threatening trend is the *sidelining of elections* by the outsourcing of state functions to shadowy 'governance' arrangements, such as the global manufacture and trade in weapons<sup>31</sup>. These so-called 'governance' mechanisms in effect render elections obsolete. They typically come wrapped in cross-border power chains, powerful 'flanking' institutions, including military-industrial complexes, corporations and large banks and credit institutions, whose modus operandi both sets aside elections and drags them down, into the maelstrom of dysfunctions produced by contemporary capitalist economies.

Market dysfunctions are among the most powerful force working to destabilise and undermine the 'free and fair elections' orthodoxy. Charles Kindleberger, Wolfgang Streeck and other scholars have pointed out that the near-collapse of the Atlantic region

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<sup>30</sup> K. Kollman, *Outside Lobbying: Public Opinion and Interest Group Strategies*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998.

<sup>31</sup> A. Feinstein, *The Shadow World: Inside the Global Arms Trade*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 2011. This 'world of money, corruption, deceit and death' is connected to states, the United Nations, large listed corporations and covert operators in such intricate and unaccountable ways that most researchers don't seem to know where to begin their investigations, and so don't bother. The whole shadowy trade is fastened by middlemen, agents, brokers, lobbyists and so-called economic offsets in procurement decisions (promises by arms manufacturers to invest in a buying country's economy). It thrives on and protects itself in silence hidden by talk of 'transport and logistical services' and other euphemisms. According to monitory bodies such as Transparency International, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute and Corruption Watch, the industry accounts for an estimated 40 percent of corruption in all global trade. Profits run into the billions; losses are counted in human lives, physical destruction and disruptions of the lives of millions of people. Covert export deals worth around \$60 billion are annually signed, almost all of them (85%) within the jurisdiction of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (US, Russia, France, United Kingdom and China) plus two other states, Germany and Italy.

banking and credit sector in 2008 was only the latest in *a long sequence of market failures* that date back to the mid-1970s, when post-1945 OECD prosperity began to end<sup>32</sup>.

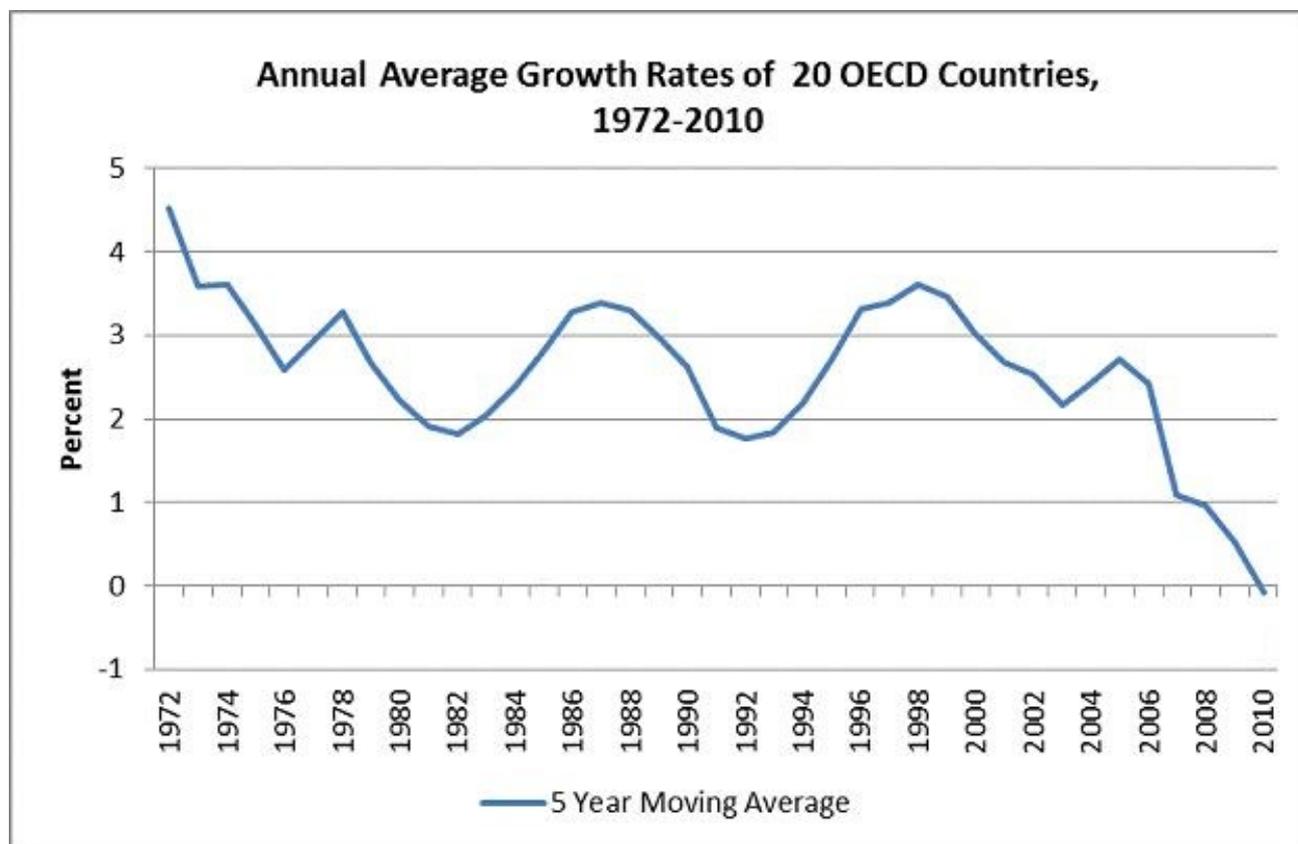


FIGURE I – Source: OECD Economic Outlook: Statistics and Projections

Successive crises have since grown more severe; an increasingly interconnected global economy has helped spread their effects more widely and rapidly. Global inflation in the 1970s gave way to rising public debt in the 1980s, while fiscal consolidation in the 1990s was accompanied by sharp increases in private sector indebtedness. Disequilibrium, as the economists say, has become the normal condition of OECD capitalism. If capitalism is a social order and way of life that is vitally dependent on uninterrupted private capital accumulation, then practically every electoral democracy is today trapped within three deep-seated, long-term trends: a persistent decline in the rate of economic growth, recently aggravated by the events of 2008; continuing increases in overall levels of indebtedness of governments, private households and non-financial as well as financial firms; and marked increases of inequality of income and wealth.

<sup>32</sup> C. Kindleberger-R.Z. Aliber, *Manias, Panics, and Crashes: A History of Financial Crises*, Hoboken NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2005; W. Streeck, *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*, London-New York NY: Verso, 2014.

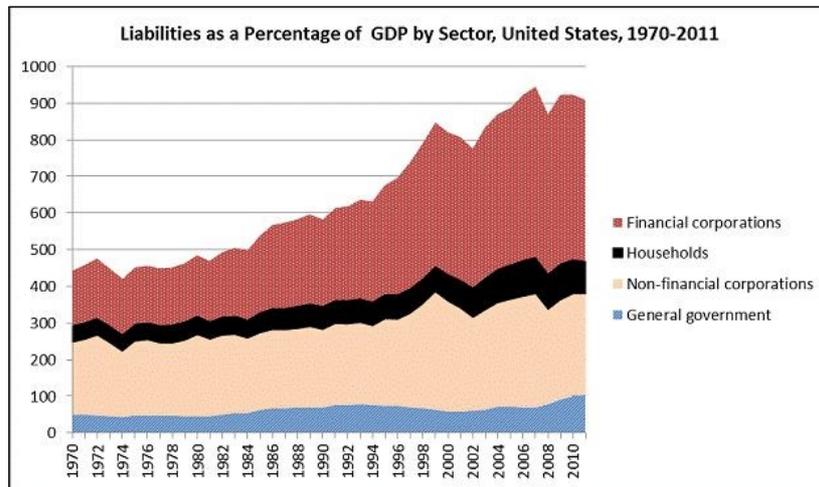


FIGURE II – Source: OECD National Accounts

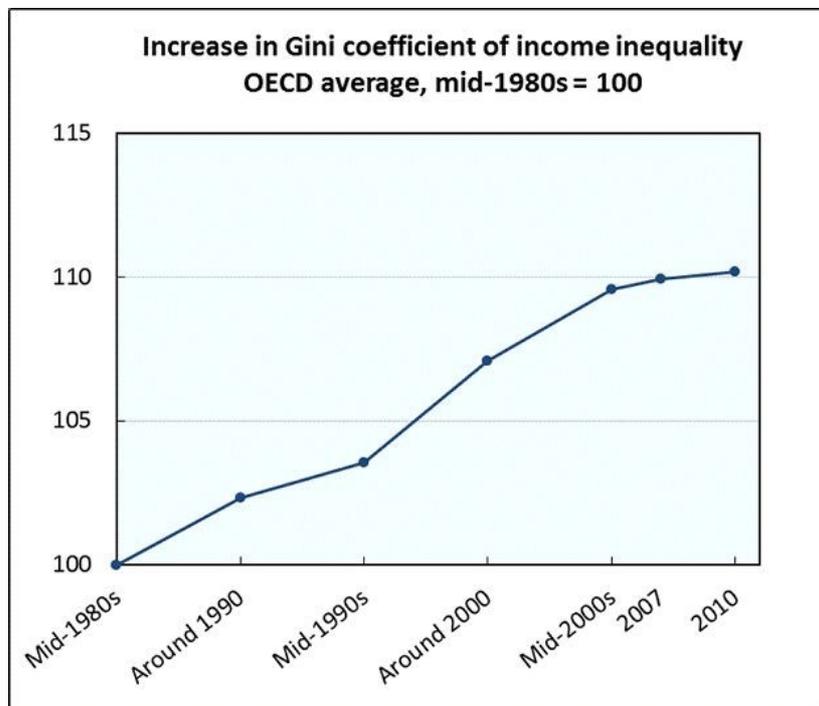


FIGURE III – Source: OECD Income Distribution Database

Steady economic growth, sound money and a measure of social justice, redistributing some of the fruits of capitalism to citizens without capital, were long considered prerequisites of ‘democratic capitalism’. Now that these fragile preconditions have been weakened, or are rendered absent, elections potentially lose their public legitimacy, especially within those parts of the voting population who find themselves for one reason or another towards the bottom of the social pile<sup>33</sup>. Disaffection among ‘the precariat’ (Guy Standing) is the result, sometimes to the point where elections begin to have an 18<sup>th</sup>-century feel about them, even in the most ‘advanced’ electoral democracies, including the so-called ‘mother’ of parliamentary democracy, the United Kingdom.

<sup>33</sup> W. Merkel, “Is capitalism compatible with democracy?”, *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft*, 8 (2/2014): 109-128.

Consider the dynamics and results of its 2015 General Election. The scheduled election attracted great global attention and floods of commentary on such matters as the break-up of Britain, the possible exit of Britain from the European Union and the dismal failure of the Labour Party to win over those parts of the middle class convinced there is no alternative to the mean clampdown politics of austerity. The 2015 election was a media event extraordinaire. For a few days, it even featured robust debate about the failings of a first-past-the-post electoral system that awarded only one seat each to UKIP, which won 3.8 million votes, and to the Greens, who won 1.1 million votes.



Voter Turnout, United Kingdom General Elections (1950-2015) UK Political Info

By contrast, media assessments of the ocean of public disaffection on which the ship of Westminster and its parliamentary elections are now floating were rare. During the days following the election, for instance, commentaries within the British press on the steady decline of voter turnout since 1950 (the United Kingdom now ranks 76<sup>th</sup> in world turnout rankings) were absent. There were no mainstream media analyses of the number of citizens who actually voted for the return of a Tory government now blessed (thanks to the first-past-the-post electoral system) with an absolute majority of seats in the House of Commons. The statistics were telling of a malaise: on an overall turnout of 66.1%, a mere 24.4% of adult citizens actually cast their vote for the new Conservative government.

Such figures were mostly ignored by journalists and public commentators. Some expressed lament for the way television broadcasters successfully managed to push *'horse-race'* coverage, for instance by emphasising just how close the contest was between the Conservatives and Labour, why a Labour/SNP coalition government was a real possibility, and whether or not such a government could handle the stagnant economy. Other commentators chose to bang on about the surprise result, and why it happened; or they noted the end of Duverger's Law, which states that first-past-the-post systems typically produce two-party systems. Missing in these reports was any sense of the several ways, slowly but surely, electoral democracy in Britain is drifting backwards, heading towards a 21<sup>st</sup>-century version of late 18<sup>th</sup>-century politics. The analogy is deliberately provocative, but it serves to highlight the way present-day parliamentary politics is coming to be dominated by such 18<sup>th</sup>-century facts as the capture of government by the rich, the weakening of independent parliamentary powers and the near-collapse of mass membership political parties. The regressive trend includes as well

cuts to welfare support and urban services for permanently poor people (1 in 5 of the UK population, 13 million people, now live below the official poverty line). Elections that bear more than a passing resemblance to pork-barrel plebiscites, widespread public mockery and disaffection with politics on high and tough law-and-order measures designed to spy on and control ‘harmful activities’ are also part of the same backsliding. With just a touch of exaggeration, it can be said that such trends, if not restrained or reversed, point towards a future world run by a political class that heeds the advice given by Vilfredo Pareto to Benito Mussolini: to stabilise the property system and strengthen state power, he recommended, camouflage the transfer of decision-making power from elections and parliament to the closed circles of ‘elites’; and do so by promoting rump parliaments that tame the democratic feelings of the masses by giving them the illusion of participating in state power<sup>34</sup>.

### 3. *Elections Without Democracy*

The feeling that elections are ritual manipulations of the powerless by the powerful rich reaches its nadir in the whole phenomenon of *electoral despotism*<sup>35</sup>. In countries such as Russia and Vietnam, in the Gulf region, central Asia and elsewhere ruling oligarchs use periodic elections as an instrument for consolidating and legitimating their rule. These despotisms are unique to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They are not failed or half-way houses to ‘democracy’; they are not ‘defective democracies’ or ‘delegative democracies’ (O’Donnell) that lack checks and balances, or ‘illiberal democracies’ (Zakaria) that fail to uphold the rule of law. They are not in-between, ‘hybrid regimes’ (Diamond) or ‘semi-democracies’, or ‘semi-authoritarian regimes’ or ‘semi-dictatorships’, or the polar opposites of ‘liberal democracy’ (Fukuyama). They are something other, something novel. The new despotisms are slick, media-saturated oligarchies backed by great concentrations of wealth held in a few hands. Their oligarchs rule through law and resort when necessary to unrestrained violence and targeted fear. Yet the new despotisms are quite different than old-fashioned dictatorships. They are a state-of-the-art form of manipulative power, a new type of political regime that manages to do something many observers thought to be impossible: the new despotisms win the affection and calculated support of their subjects, not just through the promotion of economic growth and general wellbeing, but also through experiments with top-down ‘democratic’ techniques of consensual government, including staged elections.

The new despotisms could be described as regimes that practice *elections without democracy*. Previous anti-democratic regimes, for instance in South Africa, made use of elections, but the despotisms of our time do so differently, in much more sophisticated ways. From Belarus to Azerbaijan, Hanoi and Kuala Lumpur, despotisms embrace the institutional facades of electoral democracy by granting the universal franchise (the few exceptions include the UAE, where women are banned from voting). These regimes offer a selected number of candidates the chance of higher office; subject the head of

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<sup>34</sup> V.F.D. Pareto, *The Transformation of Democracy* (1921), New Brunswick NJ: Transaction Books, 1984.

<sup>35</sup> J. Keane, *The New Despotisms*, London: Harvard University Press, forthcoming.

government to electoral confirmation; and allow a measure of multi-party competition. Despotisms also bring to perfection the dark arts of manipulation. Living proof that elections can be functional instruments of top-down rule, these regimes exclude candidates considered undesirable, buy votes and intimidate voters. They concoct sensational media events, gerrymander, alter electoral lists and miscount and disappear ballots.

Why do despotisms bother with such practices? It is a mistake to suppose that despotic rulers are disconnected from reality, or that they live in a permanent state of denial, or that the elections they convene are merely propaganda-massaged plebiscites. Elections are much more useful tools of rule. They enable dissenters in the governing hierarchy some room for manoeuvre. Electoral contests can help settle old scores, resolve disputes and offer low-cost exit options for discontented regime politicians. Elections can create opportunities for spotting new talent (that is, budding accomplices of power). They distribute patronage to (potential) supporters and serve as early warning detectors of disaffection and opposition. Elections may be powerful means of placing opposition parties in a quandary: their almost certain loss means they suffer loss of morale and a high risk of disintegration. Elections also have the effect of reinforcing the legitimacy of the sultans who rule from the saddles of high power. The razzamatazz of elections is an awesome celebration of the mighty power of the regime. It may even offer a chance to its subjects to behave as if they believe in the regime, through something like an 'election contract'.

Staging elections can be risky business, of course. When despotic rulers hold elections, they expect to win. But things can go wrong, as they did spectacularly in 2009 in Iran. Hence despots resort to the practice of 'election stealing'. Failing all else, in a hail of truncheons and bullets, the last word goes to the police and army. The exercise of electoral democracy then comes to mean the bludgeoning of the people by the rulers of the people for the claimed good of the people.

#### *4. Do Elections Have a Future?*

All these post-1945 trends, ranging from the widespread failure of free and fair elections to take root in national soils, the disenchantment of elections and the growth of monitory democracy to electoral rebellions and rough music politics, the pollution of general elections by big money and corporate lobbyists, the outflanking of state functions by 'governance' mechanisms, cross-border power chains and powerful state and market actors, plus the rise of electoral despotism, are clear and present threats to the ideals and substance of electoral democracy, and to the orthodoxy that has sprung up around it.

Pressured by such trends, the aura, passion and functional purpose that accompanied the historic post-1789 struggles for 'one person, one vote' seem to be dying, or in some contexts already dead. Elections are losing their former significance, and this raises new questions of global importance. In spite of their declining importance in determining who gets what, when and how, do general elections with integrity have a future? Do they still matter and, if so, is their rejuvenation and improved integrity, against formidable

odds, now among the vital political imperatives of our age? Or are general elections slowly losing their grip on democracy? Are they perhaps in terminal decline, or (as David Van Reybrouck and others contend)<sup>36</sup> destructive of the spirit and substance of democracy? Is the universal belief in the universality of ‘free and fair’ elections a mid-20th-century delusion with 18<sup>th</sup>-century roots, a worn-out dogma now urgently in need of replacement by fresh visions and new democratic innovations fit for our times?

Convincing answers to these questions are difficult, and it may be that the questions will in retrospect turn out to be not the right questions. Yet one thing is certain: the multiple trends examined above take the known post-1945 world of elections and electoral politics into the future, towards the unknown. The dynamics may tempt the reader to draw the conclusion that the whole analysis presented here is confusedly neither for nor against elections and representative politics, but just the reverse. Vexed ambivalence is actually just one possible type of reaction to the multiple and conflicting challenges faced by general elections, and (normatively and strategically speaking) not such a helpful reaction at that. A clear-headed account of the future options facing the 21<sup>st</sup> century world of general elections is instead needed. At a minimum, it would include *three possible and contested futures*:

### *Against Elections*

The first scenario is championed by intellectuals, journalists, NGOs, citizen activists and others who are deeply disaffected with electoral politics. Their *refusal of general elections* leads them to favour election boycotts, ‘real democracy’, extra-parliamentary rough politics and other forms of citizens’ direct involvement in public life. “There’s gonna be a revolution”, says the British entertainer Russell Brand, “it’s totally going to happen. I ain’t got even a flicker of doubt. This is the *end*. This is time to wake up.” Brand rails against a political system that produces “a disenfranchised, disillusioned, despondent underclass that are not being represented”. Voting is tacit complicity with this system: “I say when there *is* a genuine alternative, a genuine option, then vote for that. But until then, pfffft, don’t bother. Why pretend? Why be complicit in this ridiculous illusion?”<sup>37</sup>

The angry tears of disappointment with the whole paraphernalia of electoral democracy are palpable, yet the call to abandon elections, the political strategy of treating periodic voting and political parties as the fossil fuel of contemporary democracy, prompts two immediate objections. More obviously, when citizens turn their backs on elections and fail to exercise their vote, they in effect lose potential access to vital state resources such as taxation revenues, control over policing and law and the crafting of top-down political narratives. Less obviously, the neo-anarchist attack on elections embraces the principle of *unelected representation*, yet it does so secretly, without clearly acknowledging the basis of its own legitimacy, or its own populist or demagogic potential.

The call to abandon elections attracts strange bedfellows, including those who champion methods traceable to the imagined world of assembly democracy in ancient

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<sup>36</sup> D. Van Reybrouck, *Tegen Verkiezingen*, Amsterdam-Antwerp: De Bezige Bij, 2013.

<sup>37</sup> From the widely-circulated interview with Russell Brand by Jeremy Paxman, *BBC Newsnight* (October 23, 2013) available at [http://www.correntewire.com/russell\\_brand\\_vs\\_jeremy\\_paxman\\_the\\_full\\_transcript](http://www.correntewire.com/russell_brand_vs_jeremy_paxman_the_full_transcript).

Greece. Here the preferred alternatives include deliberative assemblies and the random selection of decision makers by means of sortition. The Flemish historian and writer David Van Reybrouck has recently caused a minor sensation in the Low Countries by insisting that Western democracies are suffering so much election fatigue (electoral democracy is ‘killing’ democracy, he says) that what is now needed is the replacement of the ritual selection of representatives to parliament by an allotted assembly. “The realities of our democracies disillusion people at an alarming rate. We must ensure that democracy does not wear itself out,” he says, convinced that elections are a cause of paralysis of democracy because electoral democracy is a contradiction in terms, and in practice. Representation is essentially an aristocratic device: a form of delegation according to which “the person who casts his or her vote, casts it away”. From his neo-classical perspective, elections “are not only outdated as a democratic procedure, they were never meant to be democratic in the first place. Elections were invented to stop the danger of democracy”. It follows from this conjecture that periodic elections are formulae for periodic frustration and unhappiness among citizens, the cure for which, Van Reybrouck concludes, is ridding democracies of ballot box fetishism. “Three thousand years of experimenting with democracy, and only two hundred years of playing with elections: and yet, we believe that elections are sacred”, he concludes. Since there is in fact nothing sacrosanct about elections and their ‘one person, one vote’ principle, the time has come to embrace the alternative principle of ‘one person, one chance’. If democracy is the struggle for the “the equal distribution of political chances”, then sortition, the random sampling of opinions and decisions by citizens considered as equals, is the way forward, to a more democratic polity<sup>38</sup>.

Van Reybrouck tellingly notes that sortition is already in widespread use in democracies, for instance in the public opinion polling industry; and his attack on psephocracy is often insightful, especially when highlighting the limits of general elections as conflicting producing and conflict resolving devices. He is right to point out that democracy is unique among political forms in its celebration of conflict as an open learning process; that a world “in which conflicts are constantly being maximized is not a democracy, it is hysteria”; and that “learning to live with conflict” by various means of conflict resolution, other than elections, is of basic importance to the survival and flourishing of any given democratic arrangement. But his proposal suffers substantial weaknesses. Quite aside from the strategic difficulty of who will support and implement sortition democracy, on a scale sufficient to displace general elections (a difficulty encountered by G1000, a Belgian citizens’ initiative funded by voluntary donations and launched with his help during 2011), the whole approach misrepresents the process of representation, which is by no means equivalent to throwing away votes. The critique of elections underestimates the conceptual and practical difficulties that flow from a wholly secular understanding of the *kleroterion* method of making decisions, which in the ancient Greek assembly democracies was widely supposed to be watched over and shaped by the will of the deities. It ignores the functional advantages of intelligent political leaders

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<sup>38</sup> D. Van Reybrouck, *Tegen verkiezingen*, and Id., “On Democracy”, in P. van Parijs *et al.*, *The Malaise of Electoral Democracy and What to Do About It*, Brussels: Re-Bel 2014 ([https://dial.uclouvain.be/pr/boreal/object/boreal%3A146556/datastream/PDF\\_01/view](https://dial.uclouvain.be/pr/boreal/object/boreal%3A146556/datastream/PDF_01/view)): 6-8.

who are elected; and in its prevarication about whether or not elected legislatures should be replaced by a ‘parliament of allotted citizens’, the whole approach secretly embraces the principle of representation, without acknowledging openly that it is doing so.

Both the neo-anarchist and neo-classical attack on psephocracy also ignore two connected global trends in the contemporary field of elections. A striking feature of the post-1945 period is *the changing political geography of elections*. We live in times marked by experiments in deliberative polling, online petitions and audience and customer in such areas as schools, hospitals, factories, offices, airports and popular media entertainment voting (think of the ‘clickocracy’ of the Eurovision Song Contest). Communicative abundance enables diaspora voting and national elections witnessed by regional and global publics. Cultures of voting extend for the first time into cross-border settings once controlled by empires, states and business organisations. The rules of public scrutiny and representative government are applied to the inner workings of growing numbers of large-scale global organisations, including the WHO, the WTO, the Antarctic Treaty System and the International Olympic Committee (IOC), whose co-opted governing members meet at least once a year in Session. The IOC assembly, for instance, is open to journalists and is charged with managing the common affairs of the IOC, including the recommendation of new IOC members, monitoring the codes of conduct of existing members and overall performance of the IOC itself.

All these trends suggest that jostling for victory on the battlefield of elections is of *growing significance* in people’s lives, and that while it is true that general elections are being devalued at the territorial state level, elections in general are not in fact fading away. If anything the *culture of elections is spreading*, to the point where *national elections are being outflanked and supplemented by multiple types of elections, in multiple locales*. Among the important consequences of this dynamic is a second empirical trend ignored by the rather Eurocentric critics of elections: the *growing frequency of founding elections* at various points on the face of our planet. In 1945, following several decades that saw most experiments in electoral politics fail, there were only a dozen democracies left on the face of the earth. Since then, despite many ups and downs, electoral democracy has become a planetary phenomenon. Fresh research perspectives are needed to make sense of this sea change; the language and institutions of elections have taken root in so many different geographic contexts that several fundamental presuppositions of electoral democracy have been invalidated<sup>39</sup>. As elections have spread through the world, the world has made its mark on elections. Well into the twentieth century, for instance, Atlantic-region analysts of democracy supposed that the functional prerequisites of electoral democracy included (a) a ‘sovereign’ territorial state that guaranteed the physical security of a resident population of citizens living within a rule of law system; (b) a political culture favouring mechanisms that were widely supposed to be synonymous with democracy: competition among political parties, periodic elections and parliamentary/presidential government; (c) a more or less homogeneous social infrastructure or ‘national identity’ bound together by a common language, common customs and a common sense of

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<sup>39</sup> J. Keane, “Democracy: Twenty-First-Century Horizons”, in Z. Barber-J.M. Bryant (eds.), *Society, History and the Global Condition: Essays in Honor of Irving M. Zeitlin*, New York NY-Toronto: Lexington Books, 2010: 129-151.

shared history; and (d) a market economy capable of generating wealth that lifted citizens out of poverty and guaranteed them a basic standard of living sufficient to enable them to take an interest in public affairs.

India, Taiwan, Mongolia, South Africa, Bhutan, Nepal and Tibet are just some of the anomalous cases that throw into disarray more than a few presumptions about electoral democracy, whose *indigenisation* has produced many new election-related practices, such as reserved seats, party hopping, vote banking, silent election rallies and voting as solidarity rituals. Efforts to found new electoral democracies have undoubtedly helped keep alive *the joy of founding elections*. During the whole of the post-1945 period, until today, so-called founding elections have become commonplace. Scholars have tried mainly to define their significance in terms of their contribution to the ‘transition to democracy’; on this view, when after a period of prolonged authoritarian rule a founding election prepares the way for a succession of ‘free and fair’ elections, any given polity can be considered to be on the highway to ‘consolidated democracy’.

The whole approach – and the first option under review here – arguably understate the ‘spirit’ of founding elections: not just the joyous celebrations and shared exhilaration of citizens acting as equals in public, but the way in which elections are a special moment in the more extended and deeper process of rendering contingent and publicly accountable the power relations within any given milieu. There are signs as well that founding elections in this sense are not confined to ‘transitions to democracy’. The joy of power-monitoring founding elections can appear at any time, and in a variety of contexts, sometimes without much warning. When this happens, elections and their integrity cannot be measured straightforwardly by voting outcomes or by polling citizens’ opinions. Something like an anthropology of elections is needed, if only to grasp the ways in which they function as symbolic rituals. The point missed by the instrumentally-minded critics of contemporary elections is that founding elections are moments when millions of citizens, often for the first time in their lives, experience the thrill of acting together as equals. Putting hell behind them, in search of a future where bosses and beggars are no more, they go the polling stations (to recall Schiller’s *An die Freunde* [1795]) as if they are capable of kissing the whole world. For that reason, founding elections are not mere instances of instrumental calculation. They are public performances in which the act of voting resembles a joyous carnival of equality, a moment when the world is potentially turned upside down, a celebration of equal togetherness shaped by ancient traditions, present-day world views and collective visions of how the polity might in future be organized.

#### *The Renewal of General Elections?*

A second thinkable type of reaction to the corruption and decline of general elections is the effort to *recapture the founding spirit and raise the integrity level* of elections and election procedures. This option typically comes wrapped in strong-language denunciations of the status quo, rejections of established party systems (‘la casta’) and spirited objections to the spineless ineffectiveness of parliaments, especially the ‘alexithymia, the difficulty of recognising the sufferings of others’ of politicians. Sometimes there are calls for a ‘revolution’ through elections, a dramatic new beginning that puts ‘honest people where

they should be' in place of "the corrupt, with their champagne, vibrators and dinners, who don't think they're corrupt"<sup>40</sup>.

What are we to make of such bold claims? History matters, for we have seen how the passion and purpose that fueled the historic post-1789 struggles for 'one person, one vote' seem to be dying, or dead. Despite the periodic eruptions of voter enthusiasm and media frenzies, and when measured in terms of their efficacy, elections are not what they used to be. So it comes as something of a surprise that our times are equally marked by the organised refusal to let hollowed-out elections get the upper hand. There are not only signs of renewed interest in making elections 'free and fair'; many efforts are under way to improve their forms and invest them with new meaning<sup>41</sup>. Tinkering with election procedures and customs is commonplace. There are efforts to refurbish the powers of legislatures and demands for automatic, same-day, universal voter registration. Court actions against gerrymandering are launched (an example is the current case before the US Supreme Court, *Evenwel v. Abbott*, to decide whether all residents or just eligible voters should be counted in re-districting exercises). And there are calls for the reduction of the voting age, and for tougher restrictions on lobbying, campaign financing and advertising.

These and other measures are designed to counter feelings of the worthlessness of voting ('elections without democracy'), to breathe new life back into the spirit and substance of elections. This second option has much to teach us about the corruption of present-day general elections, and about possible alternative futures of elections. But it also raises the vexed political question of whether political parties can be revived, or their hand strengthened, so that once again they can function as open and dynamic partisan traders of the votes of citizens.

During their heyday, as Robert Michels pointed out in his classic *Political Parties* (1911), political parties were powerful patronage machines within the field of parliamentary elections. They offered paid-up members and supporters significant benefits: jobs, financial support, literacy, promises of one-person one-vote and access to state power and its resources. Parties today are ghostly and often corrupted silhouettes of their former selves, which raises a fundamental question: since representation, making claims and acting on behalf of others, in their name, subject to their consent, is an ineradicable and often positive feature of political life, and given that for the foreseeable future political parties in some form or other will remain indispensable conduits of access to such state resources as taxation revenues, law-making powers and policing and military force, which kind of political party has the greatest chances of success in getting out the vote, attracting the support of citizens during general elections? Do present-day rough music revolts against parliamentary representation signal the end of all efforts to rebuild mass membership parties? Perhaps slimmed-down and flatter parties using multi-media tactics and Google-type algorithms are better suited to the task of turning heads and inspiring the hearts of voters, a viable alternative to the old mass-membership party examined by Michels? Or when all is said and done, might party forms of the 21<sup>st</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> J. Politi, "Lunch with the FT: Beppe Grillo", *Financial Times* (London), July 17, 2015 (<https://www.ft.com/content/55d3242a-2bb2-11e5-8613-e7aedbb7bdb7>).

<sup>41</sup> R.L. Hasen, *The Voting Wars: From Florida 2000 to the Next Election Meltdown*, New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2015.

century instead be fated to resemble accountancy parties (let's call them). Might there in future be more of what we have now, so that organised parties resemble firms of well-advertised accountants and tax advisors hungry for business? Drab firms that nose-pinching citizens conveniently hook up with from time to time, when the need arises (elections), to do what they have to do (deal with the state), to submit their returns (by casting their votes), then to resume their everyday lives, at a distance from the party system, all the while complaining about the performance of politicians and poking fun and spinning crabbed jokes about the sad and boring rituals of all parties, including the party for which they've just voted?

### *Monitory Democracy*

Answers to these demanding political questions of our time are currently in short supply. They are certainly testing the imagination and resolve of the new parties and public leaders (among them Syriza, Beppe Grillo, Ko Wen-je, Podemos, Jeremy Corbyn and Mayawati) who have tried hard during recent years to breathe fresh life back into electoral politics and to recapture the joyous excitement of founding elections by experimenting with new political party forms. For the many reasons cited earlier, it is doubtful whether a straightforward return to mass-membership political parties can be achieved. It is also unclear whether it is possible to rebuild political parties and parliaments robust enough to tackle the devaluation of elections by such extra-parliamentary forces as corporate power, governance arrangements and cross-border dynamics. Perhaps the most serious weakness of this second option is its rather backward-looking attachment to the orthodox presumption that general elections are the alpha and omega of democracy. In spite of their good intentions, contemporary struggles to refurbish general elections and to make them the centerpiece of democracy arguably misread the post-1945 period, probably to the point where they are fated to dash the hopes and disappoint the expectations of citizens and their representatives. That is why other political forces are now pursuing a third option: *the active pursuit of monitory democracy*.

This third pathway to the future recognises that although *voting in general elections remains important, illusions about its political centrality and significance must be abandoned*. The champions of monitory democracy agree that citizens and their representatives who turn their backs on elections, who follow the neo-anarchist or neo-classical path, risk throwing away weapons that potentially provide the weak with stronger access to taxation revenues, administrative support, the means of law making and law enforcement and other vital resources of state power. Yet when it comes to deciding who gets what, when and how, say the champions of monitory democracy, other legitimate means of publicly controlling arbitrary power are in practice often more important. The role of the not-for-profit International Council on Clean Transportation in recently 'outing' Volkswagen stands as a symbol of monitory democracy in action. In triggering a global media event that has already cost the company heavily, and will almost certainly keep it in the courts for many years to come, this previously obscure non-governmental body has demonstrated that democracy is about much more than periodic general elections. The Volkswagen affair highlights the way in which the democratic politics of our time is caught up in a long-term historical shift, away from the fetish of elections and

parliaments and politicians towards public efforts to scrutinise and control arbitrary exercises of power, wherever they occur, whether in the domestic fields of government and markets and civil society, or in cross-border settings.

In the age of monitory democracy, this third perspective maintains, the politics of citizen activity and representation cannot be confined to elections, parties and parliaments, that is, formal parliamentary politics in the narrow sense. Often in opposition to mainstream political parties and electoral politics, watchdog networks, integrity commissions, activist courts and other forms of unelected and non-party representative politics are flourishing, and need further to be cultivated, say the defenders of monitory democracy. Monitory mechanisms are seen to be fit for a highly complex world in which substantial numbers of citizens believe that politicians are not easily trusted, and in which governments are often accused of abusing their power, or being out of touch with citizens, or simply unwilling to deal with their concerns and problems. By addressing such concerns, the champions of monitory democracy say, power-scrutinising and power-constraining mechanisms perform a variety of functions. They break the grip of the majority rule principle – the worship of numbers – associated with representative democracy. Freed as well from the measured caution and double speak of political parties, monitory mechanisms grant a voice to the strongly felt concerns of minorities that feel left out of official politics. Some monitors, electoral commissions and consumer protection agencies for instance, use their claimed ‘neutrality’ to protect the rules of the democratic game from predators and enemies. Other monitors publicise long-term issues that are neglected, or dealt with badly, by the short-term mentality encouraged by election cycles. Still other monitory groups and networks (public occupations are an example) are remarkable for their evanescence; in a fast-changing world, they come on the scene, bang drums, then move on like nomads, or dissolve into thin air. The key point made by the defenders of monitory democracy about all these devices is this: by making room for opinions and ways of life that people feel strongly about, despite their neglect or suppression by parties, parliaments and governments, monitory mechanisms have the combined effect of authorising unelected bodies to raise the level and quality of public scrutiny of power, often for the first time in many areas of life, including cross-border chains of power that run beneath and beyond the institutions of territorial states.

It is worth noting that the monitory democracy perspective sketched here is not straightforwardly an opponent of electoral politics; on the contrary, it courts the possibility of dynamic synergies between monitory institutions and elections, politicians, political parties and parliaments. Yet it should be noted as well that the monitory democracy perspective goes further than visions of a healthy alliance between elected and unelected authority. It highlights the possibility of *expanding the principles and practice of representation*, for instance by extending the vote to constituencies previously denied entry into the field of electoral politics. The *political enfranchisement of our biosphere* is probably the most striking and consequential case in point. The age of monitory democracy features many new power-monitoring platforms that clear space for the entrance of ‘nature’ into political life. Most obviously, there are green political parties and environmentally conscious ‘liquid democracy’ initiatives (such as the Best Party in Iceland). There are citizen science projects (the Open Air Laboratories [Opal] project in the UK is an

example) and global agreements, such as the recent Paris accord and the Convention on Biological Diversity. Daring multi-media civic occupations of mining operations, megaprojects and construction sites are multiplying. There are green think tanks and green academies; new genres of literary works emphasising humans' interdependence with the natural world; and bio-regional assemblies, some of them skilled at monitoring highly migratory species of fish, birds and animals. There are earth watch summits and, for the first time in the history of democracy, legal judgements ('wild law') and written constitutions (in Mongolia and Bhutan) that specify that every citizen is a trustee of the biosphere, hence duty-bound to contribute to the protection of the natural environment against all forms of ecological degradation.

All these monitory watchdog mechanisms enjoy a logic and rhythm at odds with general elections, yet by fostering critical awareness and public respect for the biosphere they in effect give 'nature' a public voice in the election process, and in public life more generally. Nature of course cannot speak and act for itself, or vote, in any human sense. Our biosphere certainly cannot enjoy a 'right to vote'; to do so (by definition) would minimally require it to observe sets of duties. But the monitory mechanisms listed above show that in practice nature can be granted a vote in human affairs. The new forms of political representation of our biosphere are means by which humans *limit* and *restrain* their own will to master nature by publicly offering to protect and nurture the nature to which they belong. Representation is in this sense a fiduciary relationship (from Latin *fiduciarius*, meaning '[holding] in trust'; from *fides*, meaning 'faith', and *fiducia*, meaning 'trust'), a form of voting in which citizens and their representatives are entrusted to speak and act for and on behalf of nature in circumstances where it cannot represent itself.

From the standpoint of monitory democracy, to grant a vote to nature is not to suppose that it is a fixed or given-for-all-time or uncontroversial sub-stratum of human existence. Political representation is not mimicry or communion with Nature conceived as an unalterable foundation linking the earth with the dead and the living and the unborn, as was supposed by early modern European conservatives. Human efforts to represent nature politically invite public controversies, both about the nature of 'nature' and the ways in which it has changed through time, not just according to its own endogenous dynamics but also (and now increasingly) under the impact of predatory forms of human interaction with the bio-environments in which humans dwell. In short, political representation of the biosphere is not another, more subtle and insidious form of mastery of nature. It is rather guided by human awareness that human judgments about what nature 'is' or is 'becoming' are fallible, contestable, publicly revisable. The political representation of nature in elections and beyond is a form of public monitoring of currently unequal power relationships – not a formula for imagining a new perpetual peace in which humans and nature are united, freed at last from problems caused by ignorance, misunderstanding and doubt. Struggles to extend the vote to nature have a different logic, and thrust, say the champions of monitory democracy. These franchise struggles highlight the costs generated by public ignorance of our bio-surroundings. They call upon human beings to take care of themselves and their successors, to pay attention to what is happening to land, plants and animals, springs, rivers, deserts, lakes, groundwater, reefs and oceans, and the quality of air. These new franchise struggles

insist that some things are just not for sale and that human beings' innocent attachment to 'historical progress' and 'modernisation' needs to be replaced with a more prudent sense of deep time that highlights the fragile complexity of our biosphere and its multiple rhythms. These struggles sometimes demand a halt to consumer-driven 'growth'; more commonly, they call for green investments to trigger a new phase of post-carbon expansion. Everywhere they interpret the accumulating dysfunctions of our biosphere as bad moons, as warnings that unless human beings change their ways with the world things may turn out badly – very badly indeed.

By disenchanting elections, widening the franchise and boldly redefining the role played by unelected authorities under democratic conditions, this third pathway can claim to be an original contribution to the political imaginary of democracy. The vision of monitory democracy, say its supporters, is much more than a vision. It is becoming a practical reality, an effective way of enabling citizens and their representatives to deal blows to institutional secrecy, incompetence, corruption, violence and social injustice. The champions of monitory democracy say it underscores the contemporary *limits* of electoral politics. Which is their way of saying that rather than witnessing the end of electoral politics, or bidding adieu to voting, parties and parliaments, all democracies are now faced by *a double democratic challenge*. At a minimum, monitory democracy involves strenuous attempts to breathe life back into elections, without illusions, for instance by widening the franchise and building new political parties that function as trusted representatives of the wishes and needs of citizens considered as equals. But in practice the vision of monitory democracy requires something much more than this minimum: it entails protracted, potentially complementary struggles to push beyond 'the parliamentary road', to extend the principles of citizen involvement and representation into every field of power where arbitrary rule currently violates democratic norms and distorts and damages the lives of citizens and the environments on which they deeply depend.

This double democratic challenge posed by monitory democracy is without historical precedents. Its vision of a democratic world beyond free and fair elections has no available strategic manuals. It certainly enjoys no guarantees of success. So is monitory democracy a politically viable alternative to the present-day blind fetish of elections, or the grim-faced disillusionment with its ideals? What are the chances of its survival, or future flourishing? Let's ask the historians of the future.