

Introduction

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The eleven reports that make up this collection, form part of the Horizon 2020 project, REDEM. The acronym is short for Reconstructing Democracy in Times of Crisis: A Voter-Centred Perspective and the objective of our project was to illuminate the difference it makes to our understanding of electoral democracy, its appeal, and its difficulties, if one focuses on citizens as voters, rather than as politicians, journalists, commentators, or simple observers of the political game.

Given the close association of democracy with the right to vote, an effort to look at elections from the perspective of voters might seem unnecessary. After all, we might think, isn't that what people do all the time? They speculate on what voters will or won't do; on what they should or should not do; on how their behaviour, expectations, ideas, and ideals differ nowadays from those they had in the past. Such debates form the staple of popular political commentary, of academic study of elections, and of informal discussions amongst citizens, especially at election-time. But on closer inspection, none of these adopt the perspective of *voters* on voting, even if they purport to be about what voters want or believe their politicians will/should do. Instead, they take it for granted that we know what it is like to be a voter, and well-understand the challenges that come with exercising that role within a democratic political system.

A moment's reflection, however, suggests that this is most unlikely to be the case, in part because there is so little public discussion of the rights and duties that come with being a voter, and because so many of the assumptions about those rights and duties are contradictory or confusing. Voters are regularly urged to take account of the likely effects of competing policies and parties on their own well-being and interests, even as they are told that they should, high-mindedly, consider what is good for their country overall. Nice though it would be if such injunctions were mutually consistent, it is clearly impossible for everyone in a country to vote for what most advantages them and what is best for their country, overall. So, what should we do, as voters, when these considerations conflict?

The conflict between self-interest and the common good - which voters must confront when they evaluate electoral options and decide whether and how to vote, is but the tip of a rather large iceberg. Electoral democracy is premised on the assumption that voters can, and should, hold their current government to account, by deciding whether its members deserve to be re-elected or not. But voters also need to choose a government for the future, the one best placed to address the looming challenges ahead. Combining the two tasks is straightforward if you think the outgoing government deserves to be re-elected, given what

they achieved, or tried to achieve, when in office, *and* that it is best placed to meet the challenges of the future of the alternatives available. But what is a voter to do when, as happens, they think their current government deserves to be voted out of office but that it is probably better than the available alternatives, for one reason or another? As a conscientious voter, it looks as though you are supposed to do two incompatible things, and that both of them are essential parts of your role as a voter in a democratic government. So what, exactly, *should* you do?

Unfortunately, such familiar dilemmas, which voters often encounter, are rarely acknowledged openly in public debate, nor in journalistic and academic commentary on elections, on voter behaviour, or on the state of democracy. Hence, REDEM: because the failure to recognise or acknowledge the dilemmas that come with being a voter, is to overlook something fundamental about a common feature of citizen experience in a democratic society. As voters, citizens are supposed to play a critical role in the maintenance of democracy, via their part as individuals in a process of collective choice about the constitution and direction of their government. And yet, there is next to no discussion of what it is like to be a voter - of what dilemmas it involves, what responsibilities come with voting, and whether our democracies adequately support citizens in fulfilling that role. As we have seen, the tacit assumption that we all know what the role involves, and how to fulfil it hides considerable difficulties in determining what voters should do and whether, in fact, it is morally wrong to abstain in some, even all, elections.

In REDEM, then, we wanted to see what difference it makes to the way we think about electoral institutions, and to the rights and duties of voters, to look at democratic elections from the point of view of voters, rather than of politicians, civil servants, journalists, or academics. We thought this important to counter-act a picture of voters, which it may be natural for observers or political operators to adopt, but which it would be odd for citizens themselves to adopt when they think of themselves as voters - one which sees them as the playthings of politicians and/or of social forces, to be moved around, or buffeted by one or the other, independent of their own wills. Voters are unlikely to adopt this view of themselves, however conscious they are of living in a world that they didn't choose, and in which their options are constrained by choices of others, because they generally see themselves as moral and political *agents* with choices to make, given the constraints that they face. And so, we wanted to see what elections look like from the perspective of voters as agents, and to understand how that perspective might illuminate contemporary anger and anguish about the state of our democracies, and what sorts of remedies a voter-centred perspective on democracy might suggest.

We wanted to see if a better understanding of the moral and political challenges of being a voter - and, specifically, the challenges of combining concerns for morality with the inevitably strategic and competitive dimensions of democratic elections - might illuminate increased levels of voter apathy and unwillingness to vote in many democracies, and what sorts of remedies might be available for it. Our focus is on *democratic* discontent and disillusion, because while we recognise that most countries are only imperfectly democratic, the challenges of being a voter in countries that see themselves as, and aim to be, democracies are not evidently the same as those facing citizens in countries where the government does not allow electoral competition, or actively seeks to repress or side-line electoral dissent. The strategic aspects of voting in such cases, and the moral dilemmas that they create are often

stark. Yet, even in the most perfect democracy, voting will have a strategic aspect, because voters have to decide how best to vote in order to realise their objectives (if they are going to vote), given that *other people* have different objectives, which they are also entitled to realise.

In a perfect democracy, we can assume, all possible electoral outcomes are morally justified - whoever forms the government, citizens can expect that their rights will be protected, as will the rights of others, even in distant countries. Knowing that may alleviate the intensity of the strategic aspects of voting, but it will not remove them completely. Perhaps it will not alleviate their *intensity* after all. In a world where we fully expect our governments to do what they ought, we may care even more about the good things that they could achieve, and about whose view of those good things will prevail, as we now typically worry about fending off the worst, by working out how best to use our vote on behalf of ourselves and others.

The reports in this collection, then, explore the moral and political aspects of voting - and the complex interplay between them that voters experience when they ask whether they should vote for the candidate they think best (or least bad) when they consider their personal judgement alone, or whether they should instead vote in ways that take account of how other people are likely to vote. Voters often experience such questions as a conflict between sincere and strategic voting - where the former reflects the vote that they would give, if the election depended only on them; whereas the latter feels like the vote that they can, perhaps ought to give, because in a democratic election, the result does *not* depend only on them. Although some views of democracy, as our reports show, assume that sincere voting is morally preferable to strategic voting - and we, as voters, may experience the need to vote strategically as a loss - it is unclear that strategic voting must be morally inferior to sincere voting. Democratic elections cannot and should not depend only on what *we want*, so the fact that we may have to reevaluate our assumptions about what we should do in light of what *others are doing* is not evidence that the world is not as it should be, nor more problematic morally than the fact that, as drivers, as cinema-goers or shoppers, we may have to adjust our behaviour in light of the behaviour of others.

Strategic voting, then, is not evidently wrong, and the fact that many of us take account of the likely behaviour of others when voting, may just indicate that an election is hard-fought, close, competitive and that the stakes matter. Such things can be evidence of a healthy democracy, with engaged citizens choosing amongst different options that matter to them. But the felt need to vote strategically, rather than sincerely, can have a less happy aspect, aptly characterised by the injunction to 'hold one's nose', and to vote for the option that, while malodorous, is less ghastly than the alternatives. Increasingly, that is how many citizens feel about the electoral choices they face: and while they are often willing to vote for the least awful option occasionally, being forced to do so repeatedly - whether because there are no better options, or because they are too unlikely to win - is demoralising. It is demoralising, because in those circumstances you feel forced to grant legitimacy, however conditional, to a government that you do not support and that you do not believe deserves power, in order to avoid something even worse. Repeatedly having to hold your nose when you vote is likely to make you resentful about the political choices with which you are confronted - particularly when other people seem to be able to vote for the person they want, without serious compromise on their part. It may make you feel angry that the politics of your country and/or its electoral system, repeatedly faces you with such unappetising electoral choices,

and you are particularly likely to feel this way if you feel morally compromised by the electoral choice you made, even if you felt bound to make it.

The reports in this collection are very much concerned to understand this phenomenon, and its implications for the choice of electoral institutions in a democracy. The need to vote strategically, rather than sincerely, and in ways dominated by fear, rather than hope, is a cause for democratic concern. Granted, voters cannot all get what they want, because in a free society they are likely to want very different things, and to rank political options quite differently. No voter, in a democracy, is likely to feel anguished or compromised because of that, however annoyed, even contemptuous, they may feel about the electoral choices of others, or the ideals and interests that explained those choices. Voters with idiosyncratic beliefs, which they realise others don't share (even if they should!) may find it disheartening to know that they have no chance of prevailing electorally, while accepting that given the sad state of the world, things could not be otherwise in a democracy. Disheartened, they may still go on voting and militating for the changes they wish, conscious that people do change their mind, and that political positions that were once the preserve of a tiny majority can, over time, become common wisdom, common sense, and unshakeable elements of the status quo.

Democratic voters, then, are quite capable of losing elections, even repeatedly, without becoming embittered, alienated, and angry - and without feeling that the electoral system is skewed against them, or in favour of interests and ideals that, however popular, threaten the rights, status, and security of their fellow citizens. So, can looking at elections from the perspective of voters illuminate the causes of political discontent and disillusion with democracy? Can it help to explain why non-voting is increasingly concentrated amongst the young, the less-educated and less wealthy - and why degrees of electoral abstention differ so markedly amongst countries and, even, between the same country over time? Politicians, after all, are not obviously more devious, self-serving, and incompetent than they were in the past - or, if they are, what is it about the interplay between the political conflicts nowadays and the political institutions that constrain and shape their electoral expression, that accounts for the differences between now and then? Do some ways of organising elections make it easier for all the different sections of society to express their interests and ideas politically, and to compete for power electorally in ways that strike losers, as well as winners, as fair?

There may be no perfect electoral institutions - and voters in countries with majoritarian political systems may envy voters in countries with proportional forms of electoral representation - and vice-versa. But as our reports show, there are many ways to organise democratic elections - far more than most of us are aware. The diversity of electoral systems we currently see in Europe is unlikely to represent the sum total of what is possible or desirable democratically. Our reports, therefore, highlight the scope for institutional innovation and reform that can improve citizens' experiences of democracy, and the scope for mutual learning that comes from adopting a voter-centred perspective on elections.

Granted, democracy is not just about voting and citizens as voters (or non-voters) are profoundly affected by other aspects of their lives together, such as their experiences of family, work, education, and leisure. But the point of elections, in a democracy, is that we should get the chance to learn from our experiences collectively; to reset the 'rules of the

political game', if necessary; to improve the culture and institutions that formed us; and to recognise that the competitive and cooperative aspects of politics need not be antithetical. Instead, we can organise political competition to make political cooperation mutually beneficial; and can cooperate by improving the institutions that make democratic political competition possible. To do that, however, it is essential to understand what elections look like, and feel like for voters. Hence, while the individual reports in this collection elaborate the views of their authors, rather than of the REDEM consortium as a whole, they form part of a collective effort to articulate a voter-centred conception of democracy, and to take seriously the experience of actual, and potential, voters in democratic elections.

