

Why elections fail to bring about real change

The 10 filters that make them ineffective for the radical left

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Why can't the 99% simply vote in a government that acts in their interest and not that of the 1%

At a simple level parliamentary elections sound like the ideal way for the mass of the 'have nots' to use their numbers to overcome the power and influences of the tiny number of have's. Occupy talked about this division in the language of the 1% and 99%; a crude approximation that does reflect a reality where the number of wealthy decision makers is actually very tiny, indeed less than 1%. So, why can't the 99% simply vote in a government that acts in their interest and not that of the 1%?

Let's start off by acknowledging that this is not through lack of trying. The fight for the full franchise in the 19th century was very much caught up with the idea that once everyone had the vote a government of the working majority could be elected and that would redistribute wealth in the interests of all. It was not just a large section of then left that saw things this way, the wealthy elite also did and they were terrified of the mass franchise for that reason. But they came to see that the sort of educated workforce they increasingly needed in their developing society could not be denied forever and so switched from opposition to the franchise to granting it only after they had worked out how to contain it and use to their advantage. Their ability to control the vote and electoral system was clearly demonstrated in the 20th Century when again and again left governments were elected but fundamental change was almost always avoided. How was this achieved?

Anarchists are sometimes guilty of over simplifying this process along the lines of the old slogan 'If voting changed anything it would be illegal'. The argument being that if a radical government was elected the capitalist class would overthrow it by using its influence over the military to stage a coup. There are plenty of historical examples of just this happening, Chile in 1973 being one that is often cited. But it's a crude over simplification that would mean in much of the OECD countries we haven't see interference in the 'democratic process' for a long period of time. In fact as we see a coup is just the desperate last measure if all else fails. The preferred method is to filter out radical change and replace it with harmless window dressing and minor reform.

One way of understanding how this happens is to compare the process to a filtration system. Each filter in the system is designed to catch a particular type of threat. Ideally those being filtered are not only unaware this is happening but actually co-operate in the process. What are these filters?

1. Costs

The first filter is relatively obvious and is often acknowledged particularly by those on the left. Running in elections is an expensive business in most countries. In some countries like the US the amount of money candidates spend strongly predicts who the winner will be. Under the US system a lot of information is disclosed about election finances and the Opensecrets website has gathered a lot of this information which we use here as a detailed example. Elsewhere, especially in Ireland, there is a lot of secrecy with many cash donations being made in brown envelopes and so never recorded. However if the public US results show that are elections funded by the richest section of the population we can only assume the real figures, if known, would be much worse for Ireland.

From 1968 to 2008 there have been 11 US presidential elections, in 9 of the 11 elections the winning candidate has been the one with the most money. The case is similar in the 2012 elections to Congress, of the 435 seats that candidates filed their expenditure for, 409 of them had spent more money in their races. In only 26 — or 6% of cases — was the candidate with the most money defeated — and some of those cases were where that candidate had been exposed as a complete crook or caught sniffing cocaine at a gangster’s birthday party. Remember that in 2014 the top 0.1% of the US population owned as much wealth as everyone in the bottom 90%. If wealth decides election the 0.1% in effect get to outvote the 90%.

So how much money are we talking about and who contributed it?

In the same US electoral cycle in 2012 a total of \$6285 million was spent on the elections with \$2621 million spent on the presidential race. Most of that money came from a tiny number of people, 63% came from just 0.4% of the population. And that in an election where there were far more donors than usual thanks to the Obama effect. The top individual donor gave 93 million, the top business (an American casino and resort operating company) gave \$53 million.

You can understand for yourself what effect such funding has on policy passed but some rather technical research by Princeton University Prof Martin Gilens and Northwestern University Prof Benjamin Ivers has shown that *“Multivariate analysis indicates that economic elites and organised groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on US government policy, while average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence.”* In other words the policies the rich want passed by politicians gets passed, the policies the rest of us want generally don’t.

So in what is only our first filter, the money a candidate has to spend on an election turns out to determine the winner in over 90% of cases in the US. Given the enormous amount of wealth that the richest 1% hold this on its own almost allows them to determine that the results of elections will be favourable to them. The handful of exceptions are, if anything essential to maintaining the illusion that the vote of ordinary workers has any value at all. Being able to elect the occasional radical brings workers who may have lost faith in electoral, change back into the process. And not being able to stop the re-election of politicians who are caught accepting bribes would be disastrous as very large numbers of people might start to look at other mechanisms for change.

2. Media

During elections a lot of the money goes towards advertising. In the US this comes in the form of TV and radio ads, in Ireland we’re more accustomed to billboards, posters and leaflets. But alongside such advertising is the exposure a candidate is given by the media and as importantly the nature of that exposure. Are they given soft questions and allowed to waffle in their replies or are the toughest questions fired at them and no deviation allowed? Are their press conferences and stunts even covered at all? Are rumours and speculation about them reported or ignored?

All of these choices have huge impacts on how a candidate is viewed, not to mention the media is not some sort of level playing field. Much of it is owned by the same multi-billionaires who donate to the political parties and even when it’s not explicitly stated journalists know it can be career destroying to report against the owners’ interests.

One clear example from Ireland is when multi-millionaire, Tony O’Reilly, controlled the Independent Media Group — in turn it controlled most non-state media outlets. It was only years

later as he went bankrupt that one of his journalists revealed in a looking back article that “*The one clear, consistent policy was that there was to be no truck with republicanism [i.e. Sinn Fein]*”

In the UK the Murdoch (another billionaire) controlled press claimed to have decided the 1992 and 2015 elections by running blatantly biased front page stories right before the election. In the 2015 case the Independent reported that “*Mr Murdoch personally instructed The Sun to turn the heat up against Mr Miliband, telling editors that the very future of News Corp depended upon the result.*”

3. Separation of powers

Many so called democracies have limits to what parliament can decide in order to slow down or eliminate certain types of reforms. Often there is some sort of second parliamentary layer that is much less subject to any sort of popular mandate because it's either not elected at all as with the UK House of Lords or its elected only by certain limited and often elite constituencies as with the Irish senate, many of whose other seats are filled by appointment. The abolition of capitalism under most systems would not be a legal act and the legal system is protected from the parliamentary system in a way that would not allow this to be rapidly changed. In the US for instance the all powerful Supreme Court is composed of judges appointed by the ruling parties who then remain on the court until they die, ensuring that a new government cannot replace them.

Over time these filters combined prevent most electoral parties making significant anti-capitalist changes in parliament in the short term and in the medium term house train such parties so that they no longer even try. But sometimes the pressure for change is such that enough people get elected quickly who share an ideological program that is relatively resistant in the short term to these influences. Such events are rare but they are important because they lead to demoralisation and despair when they successfully get radical movements behind them, or to straight up coup, counter revolution and massacre of a movement that has not prepared for armed defence.

4. Scare mongering

When there are prolonged crises caused by major crashes in capitalism it can get to the stage where all the establishment parties have been in power and have been rejected by the people. That can lead to the situation where despite a lack of finance and media hostility a window opens where a radical party of the left (or far right) can emerge and gain a lot of votes quickly from an unhappy population. Or there can be a sudden shift of power within an establishment party bringing someone on the fringes to the centre, as happened in 2015 with the election of Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership of the UK British Labour Party and may be happening right now with Bernie Saunders in the USA..

This is where the gloves start to come off and an additional filter comes into play, that of outright scare mongering where lies are told and repeated by the establishment about such new parties and leaders. The short term impact of this can be enormous but in the medium to long term it's a risky strategy as it will tarnish the reputations of those that use it. But the process by which the radical left makes an electoral breakthrough is very often short term, taking advantage

of a window of opportunity that briefly opens due to mass struggle, scandal or crisis (or all three together).

These mechanisms normally prevent a small party suddenly making enough gains to win an election. In particular the enormous expense of elections means that a small party without wealthy backers will only be able to focus on a small number of electoral areas and so has no hope of suddenly gaining enough seats to rule. This is widely recognised so the electoral left aims at a process of accumulation over time; winning a few seats in the first election, and then building on that in subsequent elections. Looking at how such strategies worked out in the past you see that parties who are successful in this strategy end up abandoning their once radical politics by the time they come anywhere close to power. Why does this happen?

5. House training

When a worker gets elected to parliament they are no longer a worker but become part of the set of people who rule us – retaining radical ideas in your head does not influence that new relationship. Economically parliamentarians are paid many multiples of the minimum wage in most countries, often they are amongst the highest paid salary workers in a country. They often quickly qualify for a large pensions even if they lose their seat. And there are a huge amount of additional financial benefits both legal as in expenses, and dubious as in being given paid positions on company boards and illegal in the form of bribes.

They start to mix with and get flattered by an entirely different class of people than whom they were previously exposed to. Their opinion becomes important, if they co-operate and if they work well with others they can tweak legislation in a way that ‘delivers’ for those who elected them, boosting their chance of re-election. It would be foolish indeed to insist that every individual elected would be immune to the temptation to shift a little under such pressures. Any look at the history of left groups that get people elected to power demonstrates that most of them shift a lot. In Ireland the Workers Party of the 1980s managed to get seven left TDs elected. Over time 6 of the 7 abandoned any pretence of radical politics, eventually merged with the Labour Party and as the new leadership of that party became the implementors of austerity after the first election during the crisis. Much less was expected of the Green Party but they followed the same path, flipping from opposing the deeply unpopular Shell Corrib gas project in opposition to running the ministry implementing it in power.

Some individuals don’t give in. Tomas Mac Giolla stayed with the Workers Party and no one would suggest Joe Higgins of the Socialist Party had his hand in the till. But that’s fine, most parliaments do well out of having a court jester whose role is to speak truth to power and be laughed at while doing so. Anyone who watches televised parliamentary proceeding will know that this is literally what happens when such politicians stand up to tell the truth to an almost empty chamber.

6. Expertise

The other pitfall for elected parliamentarians is that they are unlikely to have much expertise when it comes to many of the decisions they are making. The British TV comedies *Yes Minister* and *The Thick of It* were based around the way top civil servants and party advisors run rings

around Ministers who can't really grasp the detail of much of what they are deciding. More seriously the 29 September 2008 Irish Banking Guarantee when the Minister for Finance effectively saddled the population of Ireland with tens of billions of bank losses was in part a product of the minister being bamboozled by banking experts.

Expertise can not only trick (or provide cover for) politicians into making decisions that go against our interests but in the medium and longer term result in politicians increasingly valuing the opinion of experts over those who elected them. Indeed the 2008 Financial crisis produced a rhetoric coming from the establishment of how good politicians listened to such experts and made tough unpopular decisions while bad politicians listened to their electorate. Parliaments are set up so that the electorate cannot mandate politicians on how to vote for exactly that reason, indeed it's often not legally valid to try and create mechanisms to mandate politicians.

7. Taking power

Parties that have limited electoral success can resist these temptations very much easier when they are too small to matter. It becomes very much more difficult when they have enough electoral success to be worth bargaining with. Negotiations only make sense with a party that is big enough for the number of seats they hold to make a difference. In that case the offer is made that some policies they get elected on will be implemented in return for them entering government. An offer that has proven very hard to resist for both party members and the people who voted for the party on that issue.

In the mid 2000s the Irish Green Party went into coalition with Fianna Fail and did get some policies that promoted cycling and energy efficiency in return. But they reversed their opposition to the gigantic Corrib project under construction by Shell and instead took up the ministry that was in effect implementing that project. Literally, they arrested those they had once stood alongside in opposing the project. And when the banking crash happened they passed the guarantee that that will mean austerity for years as the 64 billion required is paid back out of a public purse that otherwise could be used for health, education and public transport improvements. Alongside the Corrib project the Green Parties slice of power cost ordinary people in Ireland over 100 billion that could have been used to fund public services.

This is not an uncommon story. It turns out that offers of coalition (for small parties) or constituency perks for individuals are seldom resisted. Even without the bribe of taking power and the ministerial mercs, salaries and pensions that go with that it's unlikely the electorate will understand a refusal to take power, in particular if it leads to another immediate election.

8. Careerism

The people who join marginal far left parties obviously don't do so for career reasons. But for those parties that have electoral success, particularly if its based on running broad front organisations with watered down politics, this will change. In particular outside of core areas that party may offer the best chance for someone whose motivation, at least in part, includes wanting access to the power and earning power or a professional politician. And its not that easy to say no as most electoral systems reward parties who have more members, candidates and elected officials over those with less. The extra person can mean considerably more access

to the media, speaking time in the chamber and even the ability to move motions that might actually get debated. They may also mean the difference in being able to hold the balance of power and to carry or pass key votes. This is another mechanism by which a successful radical electoralist party is shifted over the course of a couple of electoral cycles to something a lot more house trained as such careerists are likely to put their own electability above all else.

9. The terror of the market

A party in power that tried to implement any sort of anti-capitalist program would quickly find itself trying to run a society subjected to the terror of the market.

Market terrorism has become a very much more potent force as the economy has increasingly globalised and finance has shifted to electronic systems. Billions of dollars can be quickly sucked out of an economy by such means leaving a country unable to make loan repayments and so unable to buy food and medical imports or pay public sector workers.

When Syriza came to power in Greece in early 2015 we saw market terrorism force them to their knees within a few short months. This despite not only their electoral mandate but the very much stronger mandate they gained from the anti-austerity referendum they staged right before they were forced to capitulate. Any radical left government will be subjected to similar and worse levels of market terrorism. The only defence against it is a revolutionary one where capitalist assets are seized and redeployed and rebellion is encouraged in other countries. But as Syriza demonstrated you can't get elected on the promise that a compromise can be negotiated and then overnight win the population to revolution instead. They were forced to their knees through the use of economic terror, a terror fully sanctioned by the Troika.

This filter is deployed relatively frequently, particularly outside of Europe and North America. It often takes the form of a currency crisis as vast sums are quickly transferred out of a country. It even happened in France, one of the G7 economies, in the early 1980s when capital flight was used to defeat a radical set of reforms that the newly elected Mitterrand government intended to introduce.

10. Coup

Our last filter is the one that anarchists often first describe, where the military are used to bring down a popular government in a coup. A surprising amount of so called democracies even build this possibility into their constitution. The Spanish constitution for instance refers to the "indissoluble unity of the Spanish nation" which has allowed the Spanish military to threaten a coup if too much autonomy is given to any of the regions. On January 7 2006 for instance Lieutenant-General Jose Mena Aguado, the commander of Spain's 50,000 ground troops threatened, *"The armed forces have a mission to guarantee the sovereignty and independence of Spain... The constitution establishes a series of impassable limits for any statute of autonomy. But if those limits are crossed, which fortunately seems unthinkable at present, it would be necessary to apply Article 8 of the constitution—the armed forces, including the army, the navy and the air force, have the duty to guarantee the sovereignty and independence of Spain, and to defend its integrity and constitutional order"*

When Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader of the British Labour Party the Sunday Times quoted a senior serving general who had served in Northern Ireland as saying *“The Army just wouldn’t stand for it. The general staff would not allow a prime minister to jeopardise the security of this country and I think people would use whatever means possible, fair or foul to prevent that. You can’t put a maverick in charge of a country’s security.”*

It’s significant that the general was never named in the media although as we were told he had been based in the north in the 1980s so the media must have known his identity. The Ministry of Defence condemned the remarks but no disciplinary action was taken. And Corbyn hardly even represented a serious future never mind present threat to UK capitalism.

The overthrowing of the Allende government of Chile in 1973 is probably the best known of the coups against reformist governments but in the period after WWII there were literally dozens of coups across the world designed to favour multinationals and block radical reforms. The only reason we haven’t seen many in western Europe is because the filters already described have been enough to block movements of electoral reform. The abolition of the Greater London Council in 1986 by Thatcher provided a title for Ken Livingston’s biography, “If voting change’d anything they’d abolish it.” Livingston, the head of the GLC prior to its abolition, would have been well aware he was repurposing an anarchist slogan.

From time to time an establishment government makes such a huge mess of people’s lives that the next election becomes a significant moment of mobilisation and expectation. Now everything will change, or so we are told. But soon the new lot in power very quickly look like the old lot who were thrown out. And all too often once the next election arrives the old lot get back in again and the cycle continues.

Those on the left who are believers in the power of parliamentary elections to bring real change hate these patterns being pointed out. In order to get people to vote for them they need to sell the electoral process to the more impoverished and marginalised groups of society. They need to get them to reengage, often by suggesting that their marginalisation is a result of them not voting previously and so being ignored. This victim blaming is a reverse of the real situation, that people ignore the electoral process because they know from experience it has not delivered meaningful change for them.

Is it worth it?

Those on the radical left who see electoralism as a legitimate tactic would probably accept the existence of most, if not all of the above filters. The more orthodox of them insist that they are only using elections as a dung heap on which to stand so that they can be seen and heard by the masses. Although rather obviously that’s not what they put on their election literature, which repeats the electoral mantra ‘Elect us and we can Change things’. If there were no costs this might be a reasonable argument. After all as well as the publicity of the electoral process itself the salaries of elected officials and their expenses including the hire of officers, research assistants and transports can amount to hundreds of thousands of euro that would be very difficult to raise by other means.

But the cost is also enormous as such participation has not only eroded the radicalism of all parties that have had any real success but done so in a way that very often leaves the movements and individuals that got sucked in disillusioned and burned out. The parties that want to try again

may try and counter that effect through presenting failures as a product of a betrayal by flawed leaders – and of course promising that they will be different but the experience has been that such defeats are the points struggle in general recedes and even collapses – too often accompanied by an electoral swing to the right.

The more insidious cost is that in order to get votes the parties and individuals involved have to convince sections of the population that have quite correctly rejected electoralism that they should participate once more. The medium to long term success of the electoral system in limiting struggle depends on these periodic revitalisations from the left. Indeed if you look back at the period from the early 20th century when the universal franchise started to become common you can observe a cycle of the energy of revolutionary upsurges being channelled into long marches through institutionalised power that go nowhere. Sometimes they win reforms for a period that are subsequently rolled back, frequently by the same party as it ‘matures’.

The task of anarchists is to convince the mass of the population that radical transformations can happen, that there is a point to politics. We have nothing to gain from cynicism about electoralism in itself. But radical change must come about outside and against the electoralist cycle. Rather than a language of revolution amounting to ‘defeating the government’ at the ballot box we need to ensure revolution is understood as a transformation that sees mass, collective self-organisation in our housing estates, communities and workplaces replacing the rule of governments, landlords and bosses.

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