

Seinfeld Elections: Why Democracy Needs Conflict

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Democracy, particularly Madisonian democracy, is not intended to avoid or brush over conflict. On the contrary, a basic tenet of democratic theory is that there will always be conflict in any society, but that it is better to resolve this conflict through elections and other constitutional processes than through violence.

Democracy works best when people in society disagree on a range of issues. If one issue, an obvious example of this would be ethnicity, dominates in a country, then election outcomes will be the same each time and the government will either be paralyzed or permanent winners and permanent losers will emerge. When this happens, democracy falters because, in the former case, the state is immobilized, and in the latter case, the permanent losers see no democratic way out of their condition. Iraq, Bosnia and Lebanon are all examples of countries where ethnic identity has held sway as the major issue which determines how people vote.

The perils of holding elections in these types of countries are well known. Elections become more like censuses as almost everybody votes their ethnic group — or to use an American analogy from a century ago, votes the way they shot in the recently concluded civil conflict.

Importantly, it is not only ethnicity which can be the dominant, or even sole, issue cleaving the electorate. In Ukraine, for example, the east-west division has been the leading issue in every election over the last five years.

But while a society with sharply divisions on one major issue — whether geography, ethnicity, religion, or something else — can create problems for democratic development, the absence of any major issues dividing society raises a different set of problems. Unity may sound like something that is helpful for democracy. But in countries where the electorate is largely undifferentiated by economic interests, ethnic or religious identity, ideology or geography, that unity can work against democratic development.

In these countries — which tend to be smaller, ethnically homogeneous post-authoritarian states — democracy becomes a series of ‘Seinfeld elections:’ elections that are about nothing. Parties do not offer competing visions or ideologies, because there is widespread agreement on where the country needs to go. Accordingly, money, patronage and charismatic leaders become even more important in driving vote decisions. If all the major parties make the same promises and seek to take the country in the same direction, then voters would be foolish to make decisions based on platforms, so selling one’s vote to the highest bidder is a reasonably rational thing to do. In the best cases, these Seinfeld elections are Dukakis elections too, where voters look at competence rather than ideology, but these examples are rare.

Unity is an appealing abstract notion, but in democracies, other than a basic agreement on the rules, unity is not a very helpful dynamic. Democracies succeed not when people don't argue and disagree, but when they argue and disagree on a range of issues. This allows for coalitions to evolve, for the winners in one fight to be the losers on another and for electoral outcomes to differ in each election. In Bosnia, it is unlikely people will stop fighting about ethnicity any time soon, just as it is unlikely that regional differences in Ukraine will fade away in the near future, but when these differences co-exist with ideological differences or economic interests, democracy will have a fighting chance in those countries. Similarly, the evolution of economic interests or ideological disputes, along with other difference, will mean fewer Seinfeld elections in a number of post-Soviet countries, giving democracy in those countries a better chance as well.