Peter Emerson: *Defining Democracy. Voting Procedures in Decision-Making, Elections and Governance.*

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Peter Emerson's book covers a range of very important issues that stretch from the theory of democracy, across decision-making procedures, to electoral systems. Hence, the book is of extreme importance for students of these areas of political science. Emerson further develops his own argumentation which appeared in a number of his earlier works (e.g. Emerson 1998, Emerson 2007).

Emerson convincingly argues that institutions (such as electoral systems) do matter, as they shape political systems and party systems and condition the success or failure of plural, segmented polities. Since institutions make a difference, Emerson distinguishes between "good" and "bad" electoral systems and decisions-making procedures, which lead to "good" or "bad" structures of government.

In this general regard, the book shares the same (institutionalist) paradigm put forward by Giovanni Sartori (1994) and Arend Lijphart (1999), although, at a lower level of abstraction, there are clear differences among these researchers.

Emerson challenges the key assumptions of some theories of democracy. From the most general perspective, Emerson rejects the argument that democracy is equivalent to majority rule. Arend Lijphart, who wrote the foreword to the book, would certainly agree. On the other hand, although Lijphart believes that the consensus model of democracy is better than the majority one, he does not go so far (as Emerson does) to argue that majoritarian rule is not democratic.

It is not by chance that the first chapter of book is centered upon the "myths of majority rule". Here, Emerson questions the majority principle used in decision making and electoral systems. Emerson argues that majority voting distorts the popular will and the will of the body which uses various kinds of majority principle in its decision-making. Moreover, majority voting also forces those who participate in voting to choose only one of two possible options: "…majority voting is not an accurate way of identifying the majority opinion, if, as often is the case – or *should* be – more than two options are possible" (p. 5). As a result, majority voting is "often very adversarial. It is yes-or-no, for-or-against. It 'forces' people to take sides" (p. 8). Thus, the majority principle is neither free, nor fair. And if the method of voting is adversarial, so is the debate itself, which also becomes "bitter and polarized" (p. 9). Majority voting is particularly detrimental in pluralist countries and conflict zones. Emerson concludes that "majoritarian politics often reduces what should be a multi-option question into a two-option choice, and many political debates are seen in terms of *either* black *or* white, even when there is no question of right or wrong, and often, when there is a considerable amount of grey" (p. 14-15). Moreover, since majority voting shapes decision-making in terms of only two-options, majority voting might even lead to violence (p. 17). Emerson provides a number of examples where he shows "horrendous" consequences of the majority principle and argues that this decision-making principle is far from democratic.

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Instead, Emerson repeatedly argues for multi-option voting procedures, in which voters are not forced to choose from "either-or". Further in the text, Emerson offers alternatives to majority voting. He explores various decision-making methods. He rejects one method after another, including the consociational model, because it still forces both people and politicians to "continue to think in terms of just two alternatives" (p. 30) and because it is more prone to the use of veto. Emerson looks for voting procedures which encourage "greater dialogue – or 'polylogue'" (p. 42) and favor solutions or candidates that are acceptable for the maximum number of those who vote.

Emerson draws inspiration from non-partisan polities and their traditional consensual decision-making principles. In Asia and Africa many traditional societies believe in "village-meetings" (baraza or gacaca) with no parties but with large open forums whose aim is to reach a broad consensus among the inhabitants. Emerson goes on to argue that in most situations more than two options may and should be formulated and submitted to decision-makers (MPs, voters and so on). Instead, in most polities MPs are asked to choose one of only two alternatives.

Since current forms of democratic political systems are not based on this inclusivity principle, Emerson asserts that decision-making in parliament, the electoral system to establish a parliament, and the electoral system within parliament need to be changed in order to ensure more inclusive decision-making and voting, and argues strongly for voting procedures derived from the Borda count (quota Borda count, modified Borda count, and matrix voting). To be more precise, Emerson advocates the modified Borda count for decision making and the matrix vote for elections. Matrix voting is particularly useful when a parliament is to elect a government or a collective executive body.

These voting systems allow voters to be presented with more than two alternatives. Voters order their preferences (for desirable policies or candidates) in that they give different numbers of points (votes) to different proposals or candidates. The more desirable proposals/candidates get more points; the less desirable proposals/candidates get fewer points. These systems are centripetal and are prone to consensual and compromise solutions that are acceptable for most of the people who participate in the decision making and voting.

Although the consequences of these voting schemes might be truly unpredictable and only a few countries use the Borda count to elect their MPs (Nauru, Slovenia) (see Chytilek et al. 2009: 167-170), Emerson still believes that only by using these procedures can the decision-making process and electoral systems become democratic, because they would be inclusive and allow all people to participate and shape a more general consensus. Emerson contrasts the majority principle, which yields win-lose outcomes and which gives the winner too much power on the one hand, and win-win solutions produced by the abovementioned inclusive voting procedures, on the other.

Consequently, Emerson argues that democracy and its definition need refinement. Emerson takes a new perspective on democracy, as he claims that: "democratic decision-making is a process which identifies either the unanimous viewpoint (where such exists); or, on more controversial issues, the average opinion or consensus; or on really contentious matters and/or especially in any plural society, the most acceptable compromise." (p. 133).

The voting procedures Emerson advocates give rise to power-sharing cabinets and weaken the role of political parties. Here, we come to another key element which has traditionally been regarded as conventional wisdom. One of the most cited theses put forward by E.E. Schattschneider was that "political parties created democracy and that modern democracy is

unthinkable save in terms of parties" (Schattschneider 1942: 1). Advocates of this argument claim that all existing democracies are party democracies (with a few exceptions such as Nauru, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, and Tuvalu) and that parties are a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for democracy to exist.

Emerson, however, looks at political parties with suspicion. He does not reject parties *per se*, but strongly opposes some features that are closely associated with them. For example, Emerson claims that "It is not political parties as such which are harmful; it is the excessive powers of patronage which they have accumulated for themselves" (p. 95). He calls for an end to the whip system and to the "present rigid party structure of politics" (p. 119).

Overall, Emerson's argumentation is clear, sharp and convincing. Emerson offers a large number of practical examples, which serve to support his arguments concerning the inadequacy of majority voting. Still, there are some weak points. As has been indicated above, Emerson is very critical of the first-past-the-post system and the two-party system. The FPTP has clearly some disadvantages. However, it seems unwarranted to argue that the first-past-the-post system "tends to encourage the unscrupulous candidate to use…uncivilized tactics" and that this electoral system is more likely to give rise to "a mud-slinging contest…" (p. 59-60). An even more serious exaggeration is made when Emerson argues that if a party wins every election and receives an absolute majority in parliament, then "its two-party state is little better than a one-party state" (p. 113). By one-party states, Emerson clearly means Soviet-style communist countries or other dictatorships. This argument is deeply flawed, as it ignores the principal differences between countries with free competition between parties, where under specific circumstances one party may repeatedly win a majority of parliamentary seats in line with the free will of people, and those countries with no party competition and no freely expressed popular will.

Emerson also tries to suggest a new institutional framework for democratic countries. This framework, however, is vaguely formulated and rather unconvincing. Emerson argues for a system with a legislature and executive elected for fixed terms, with the executive accountable to the legislature. Members of the government would be elected by parliament (p. 125 and 134). However, if the executive is elected for a fixed term, then it can be argued that the executive may not be deposed by the legislature, even though the former is accountable to the latter. Here serious problems arise. For example, what happens if the executive fails to respect the legislature to which it is accountable? True, such a system exists in Switzerland, but only in this country, and the possibility of transferring this kind of institution to other polities is rather questionable.

Furthermore, Emerson's arguments in favor of job rotations for most executive and legislative positions and limited tenures of office (1 year) (p. 125-126) also seem questionable. Job rotation and limited tenures may make the holders of respective positions powerless. The alternation of power is certainly a desirable principle, yet governance requires continuity. Constant change might destabilize the office and make it truly ineffective. Shortly after a person took office and began initiating policies, he or she would be replaced by another person with a different agenda etc. Emerson argues from the Swiss example: the Swiss president is elected for one year only. However, the Swiss president is mainly a figurehead with no significant powers and is elected from the members of the Swiss federal government, which wields executive power and which is elected for four years. Working democratic systems show that the term of office should be some four or five years so that office holders have some time to introduce and implement their policies etc.

Next, Emerson argues in favor of "non-party or all-party" governments. Since only a few political systems function without political parties, the argument clearly prefers all-party governments that very often dilute executive responsibility among numerous parties, leave no room for democratic opposition, and weaken decision-making. Emerson's arguments are thus in stark contrast with proponents of the Schumpeterian "another theory of democracy" (e.g. Schumpeter 1962; Popper 1962; see also Novák 2003).

Despite these weaker points, Emerson's book is worth reading and studying. Emerson's work is both academic treatise and "policy paper" advocating new voting procedures that are very different from those commonly used and that would be highly likely to have far reaching consequences for democratic polities. This, indeed, is probably the answer to the question Emerson raises: why do democratic countries stick to their voting procedures and why are they so reluctant to change them?

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