

VOTING IN THE HORIZON OF CONTRADICTORY TRUTHS: A PRAXEOLOGICAL VIEW ON GENERAL ELECTIONS IN STATE-SOCIALIST CONTEXTS

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/// Introduction: What Kind of Truth Do Elections Relate?

According to many accounts of the political systems of state-socialist societies, elections in those societies were barely veiled attempts to create an ideological image of societal unanimity, inevitably resulting in voting results of over 98% for the governing regime (see, e.g., Brunner 1990). However, recent historical research has drawn a much more differentiated picture, highlighting various non-instrumentalist functions of elections in socialist settings (see Pravda 1978: 186–193 and the contributions in Jesen & Richter 2011). These include the use of elections as arenas, however limited, for the negotiation of citizens' demands, especially in the case of local elections where citizens sometimes negotiated their participation in the elections with the office-holders, addressing their concrete demands to them, or the use of elections as channels of communication to the party (in some instances, voters used the ballot papers to note down messages). However, a more fundamental feature of elections in socialist societies has not yet been discussed, namely, that of relating a truth about society that appears in the context of political functionalisation but cannot be reduced to it, and is thus heterogeneous and contradictory. This article approaches such a constellation through a discussion of what the “imaginary” of the

general election, which has preoccupied political theory with respect to Western societies, was in the case of state-socialist contexts.

While no analytical concept of truth figures prominently in studies about elections and voting, I maintain that such an approach is important for understanding not only the specifics of elections and voting under state socialism but also of elections and voting much more generally. To begin with, the genealogy of the theory of democracy is saturated with doubts about the political device of general elections, which, if indirectly, invoke truth as a foil against which the particular weaknesses of general elections can be identified: they create false representations of society, are coterminous with a dictatorship of public opinion, prevent people from presenting their own causes by themselves, and so forth. In this way, a normative notion of truth becomes a point of reference for a political critique of the distortion of political articulation through elections – a point that was also made by Václav Havel (2018 [1978]), whose figure of the greengrocer eventually realises that the only way to react to elections in a sham regime is to stop participating in them. In another analytical idiom, elections and voting have become conceptualised as epistemic machines that render truths about society to the political system, so that elections are attributed the function of providing the political system with input regarding the state of affairs in society. A more social-theoretical conceptualisation of the truth of elections – bypassing criticism of elections as false representations, as well as demands for their epistemic functionality – holds that elections are part and parcel of the practices in modern polities that crosscut and interlink “political” and “societal” understandings of the world one lives in. According to this praxeological conceptualisation of truth, voting performs an important role not only by being a practice that connects citizens – with their demands, inclinations, and priorities – to the political system, but also due to its power to have macro-conceptions of society – such as the conception of a “democratic society” – redeem themselves on the level of individual agency at the ballot box. Seen from this angle, voting performs the task of inserting individuals’ actions into a broader understanding of what kind of society the individuals actually live in – which makes this understanding an epistemic understanding, that is, one that relates to truth as a basis for rendering practices such as voting meaningful.

The present article will pursue the conception of truth as informing practices which are performed with a view to overarching understandings, because, rather ironically, elections under state socialism can be related only to this conception of truth. The stringent political functionalisation

of state-socialist elections by party and/or state elites makes any more sophisticated qualms about their absent representativity redundant; and the same functionalisation accounts for their incapacity as epistemic machines for the regime (which was one reason for the outspoken uninformedness of state-socialist regimes regarding political sentiments in “their” populations). The only concept of “truth” that state-socialist elections can be analytically referred to is a praxeological one, that is, one that dissects the truth dimension of voting in the understandings that inform voting as a meaningful act – and, as will be shown, even as a politically meaningful act despite all regime functionalisation. As I will argue, it is precisely from this praxeological perspective that elections under state socialism can be seen as laboratories of a performative notion of truth that unfolds in the interstices between individual agency and popular conceptions of society.

The article will first discuss the issue of truth in elections as seen from the angle of Western political thought, and will develop the argument that the notion of truth captures the broad variety of reasons for which representative elections have been criticised. Thus, the truth of elections becomes the touchstone of more general problems that political thinkers have identified with respect to the institution of the general democratic election. Second, the article will conceptually reconstruct a praxeology of the imaginary political meaning of voting practices. This model will build upon Charles Taylor’s concept of the social imaginary, exposing the intricate relationships between concrete political practices and the truth about polity and society that they must invoke in order to make sense from the perspective of the subjects. Yet, in comparison to Taylor’s account of historically Western societies, in state-socialist contexts this truth was much more variegated, heterogeneous, and contradictory. Thus, in a third step, the praxeology of the general election will be confronted with the context of the historical evidence of the various functions of elections in state-socialist contexts, with an emphasis on the Soviet Union, where strictly plebiscitary elections were most widespread (Pravda 1978: 174–179). Here, the article aims at rescuing imaginary truths from voting under state socialism: among other things, in order to argue that imaginaries connected to voting are fundamentally plural and heterogeneous. In this connection, the analysis undertaken here may also serve as an inspiration to “un-other” state-socialist societies with regard to how they practised voting and elections, as will be hypothesised in the conclusion. It might not be too far-fetched to assume that certain propensities of the “truth” of elections in

those societies are being reinvigorated in contemporary societal and political constellations the world over.

/// Elections and Their Truths: Arguments in Political Thought

In contemporary political theory, general elections are held to be a core feature of a democratic political system (Dahl 2003 [1956]). Within this interpretive spectrum, they serve a couple of political functions. Through the majority mechanism, they represent society's interests in the institutions of government and legislation; they provide government and legislation with the required political legitimacy; they keep policy makers informed about social dynamics and concerns; finally, they might even serve the function of inhibiting the potentially dysfunctional participation of too many actors in policy-making, because representation through elections is tied to the idea that genuine political agency is exclusively the business of those elected, not of those electing (see Easton 1965).

This plethora of political functions attached to the institution of the general democratic election is stunning, as becomes evident when regarded from a historical perspective. Egon Flaig (2013a, 2013b), who has dedicated himself to a political anthropology of voting and has focused in particular on the institution of the majority decision, emphasises the comparatively recent coupling of elections (or voting more generally) and the principle of political decision-making based on numerical majorities. According to him, the Greek *polis*, where this latter principle was prominently if intermittently practised, was rather an exception from the historical rule, as voting practices have historically mostly been connected to the symbolisation and performance of political support, and not to scenes of political decision-making. Voting served the purpose of legitimising a decision that had already been taken or a ruler that had already been determined; and in this regard, its political-cultural significance did not rest mostly in the production of a difference between majority and minority, but in the signalisation of unanimity (see also Rosanvallon 2011).

According to Flaig, it is only in modernity that general elections have become tasked with the double function of creating a representation of societal concerns and priorities and at the same time of legitimising legislation to take care of those concerns and priorities. Both these ambitions are held together through the institution of majority rule: the majority decision simultaneously creates a representation of societal tendencies as mirrored in the programmatic of the individuals or party organisations elected to

power, and legitimises the empowerment of those individuals or party organisations. Yet it is also here that elections and voting become disentangled from actual decision-making – to be precise, *again* disentangled, since voting and decision-making historically did not go together most of the time (see above). Being represented through elections and majority rule is tied to waiving any claim to making genuine political decisions. It is specifically with regard to this understanding of elections as representations of society that doubts concerning their truth value – to which I will now turn – arose early on.

Hannah Arendt's criticism (2006 [1963]) about the lack of genuine political quality in representative elections – that is, that elections keep voters from becoming political actors – is as well known as her argument that the logic of politics has no room for considerations of truth. Yet, her criticism can as plausibly be traced back to Alexis de Tocqueville's (1835: 60) critique of elections as a "necessary evil" in large-scale democratic societies and his concern about the danger of "public opinion" dominating political discourse and political decision-making. Thus, unlike Arendt, whose critique he prefigured, Tocqueville did problematise elections and the public opinion as only inadequately, and with great distortion, representing societal trends and tendencies. The idea that elections, and the party-led campaigns preceding them, produce a distorted image of society can also be found in Jean Baudrillard (1991), who argues that the juxtaposition of different parties through their programmes and positions celebrates political differences and options, yet in actuality effaces the fundamental sameness of political parties and their personnel (as belonging to the political class). Seen from this viewpoint, elections belong to the "ideological state apparatus" (as one might say with Althusser), which camouflages the class divisions in society through dramatising alleged political distinctions.

While Tocqueville and Baudrillard took issue with the ways that elections of necessity distort adequate representations of society, another branch of critique highlighted the distinction between political system and society in a democracy as the source of an – at least potential – truth effect produced in the context of elections. For instance, Émile Durkheim (1991) considered democratic elections to be an unavoidable part and parcel of a democratic and republican political order, yet demanded a strict separation of voting – as an individual and thus "a-social" practice – from political decision-making. In particular, he refused the idea of an imperative mandate, which was being discussed in France at the time of his writing. Arguing that voters have individual and particularistic reasons and mo-

tives for placing their cross on the ballot, Durkheim maintained that this needed to be transcended in order to arrive at an adequate representation of society in the political system, which could only be achieved through reflection and deliberation among elected politicians, without any strings attached. In other words, to be able to arrive at a general representation of society's interests, the members of the political system must be independent from their voters' individual motives and desires. In a seemingly similar and yet juxtaposed fashion, Claude Lefort (1988) and Marcel Gauchet (1990; Lefort & Gauchet 1990) have argued that the difference between the political system and society is the main truth that elections deliver, as the serial and strict individualism of the practice of voting displaces any seemingly self-evident political representation of society. The truth that elections produce is, instead, that the political system and its games of opposition and coalition will only ever inadequately, temporarily, and transiently represent society, and be proven fallible at the next election.

To complete the rundown of positions on elections and truth in political thought, Pierre Rosanvallon's (2011) views add to the complexity of the truth(s) of elections. According to his argument, the potential of elections to make truth claims is circumscribed in contemporary societies. In particular, this is due to the differentiation between majority and minority as a fundamental feature of representative elections, whose flaws, however, are increasingly seen in the simplism of a distinction that glosses over important societal differences that cannot be rendered in terms of that juxtaposition. Furthermore, elections are increasingly being challenged by other claims at representation, such as expert discourses, non-elected office holders (especially in the legal sphere) or social movements. Thus, while elections still produce a truth about society, the legitimisation of that truth to ground political decisions and governmental powers is increasingly being critically scrutinised.

In concluding this discussion, we arrive at an utterly heterogeneous picture regarding the conceptualisation in political thought of the truth that the institution of democratic representative elections produces, refers to, or fails to encompass. Republican and Marxist critiques hold that representative elections systematically lead to a separation of elected government and institutions of governance from social and societal interests, issues, and concerns. Other approaches that highlight – if for various reasons – the necessary difference between the political system and society argue that the separation of one from the other produces a particular truth. Yet, while in Durkheim this is the moral truth of the collective consciousness, which

can only be arrived at through a rigorous isolation of political communication and decision-making from the particular motives that guide voting, for Lefort and Gauchet it is precisely the individual motivation behind the idiosyncratic act of voting that publicly establishes the truth that society cannot be fully represented by “its” political system. Finally, with Rosanvallon, an empirical concern is added to the truth that elections produce, as that truth is from the outset incomplete and circumscribed given the plethora of institutions and practices that attain representation, publicity, and “generality” in contemporary societies. Thus, in political thought, the truth claims characterising the democratic institution of general elections have come to be challenged in a myriad of ways. The critique thus fans out into reproaches of election-based representation as producing systematically distorted, ideologically charged, particularistic, or incomplete representations of society.

And yet, even given all these well-known concerns about elections and the truth effects they produce, the picture regarding the complicated truths of elections might be incomplete. What about elections in modern, yet non-liberal democratic settings? In state-socialist societies, elections were regularly held, yet, according to a widespread analysis, they were functionalised (or even falsified) by the regime to signal total societal support of the ideological and political programme (Brunner 1990; Karklins 1986; Mote 1965; Pravda 1978; Zaslavsky & Brym 1978). At first glance, it seems obvious that the whole problem of a “false” representation of society through elections was extreme in those settings, which then also would make them uninteresting for contemporary challenges to elections as a mode of political semiosis and decision-making. Yet, it is the claim of this article that even if elections under state-socialist regimes were tightly controlled politically, manipulated, or falsified, they were not simply false representations of society but enacted their own, and very specific, kind of truth.

In order to explore this thought, we must turn to a more thorough discussion of the notion of “truth” and thus avoid reducing it to the question of the appropriate (or inappropriate) “representation” of interests, structures, or concerns in society. In other words, the truth that elections perform should not be conflated with their political function, which, according to the political modernism of liberal democracies, is that of mapping the distribution of interests and political inclinations in society in order to arrive at a politically representative government. For as Flaig and Rosanvallon demonstrate, a brief look into political history already provides evidence about other uses to which elections and practices of voting

have been put. In order to address the truth of elections, beyond the modernist narrative of political representation, I will attempt a praxeological reconstruction of practices of voting as affording truths that do not refer exclusively to the political structuring of society. The truth addressed here pertains rather to the way that voting practices connect the individual act of voting – which is one of the politically most insignificant acts conceivable in a modern democracy, as it reduces the potential effect of a political communication to that of a single digit among millions of others – with understandings of the society within which this act makes sense despite its political insignificance.

/// A Praxeology of Voting: Taylor’s Conception of the Social Imaginary

The closest approximation between praxeological thinking about truth, which considers truth to be something that is being practised rather than existing in correspondence to some factual point of reference (see Kleeberg & Suter 2014), and a thematisation of elections and voting can be found in Taylor’s writings since the 1980s. Taylor mentions voting and elections (if in passing) in the context of his more general considerations regarding the structure of scientific and popular understandings of society in modernity, and how scientific and popular truths about modern society are interrelated. In the earlier writings of the 1980s, Taylor (1985) was mainly interested in the specific ways that the social sciences, as a mostly theoretical body of knowledge, relate to the societies that form their object of investigation, arguing that the social sciences enter into a relationship of performativity with social and political practice which ultimately cancels out any notion of social scientific truth in terms of mere correspondence to a reality existing independently of it. From this he argued that the truth of the social sciences can also be seen in the ways that they successfully help organise democratic and inclusive social and political practices. In his later work, Taylor shifted the perspective, now thematising the informedness of social practices by overarching – including scientific – understandings of society. On the one hand, these understandings, which Taylor (2002) termed “imaginaries,” are informed by social-science theories; on the other hand, they are not theoretically spelled out but reside in a sphere of implication and latency, becoming effective as frames of meaning that give concrete social practices their significance and meaning in everyday life.

What Taylor's conception thus shares with other praxeological approaches, such as Pierre Bourdieu's or Anthony Giddens's, is the constitutive-theoretical argument of a recursivity between mundane practices and structural and cultural features of society that overarch concrete situations. Turning towards "the practice of deciding things by majority rule," Taylor argues that "[i]t carries with it certain standards, of valid and invalid voting, and valid and invalid results, without which it would not be the practice that it is. [...] In this way, we say that the practices which make up a society require certain self-descriptions on the part of the participants" (Taylor 1985: 93). Thus, participating in elections is informed by what Taylor (1985: 93, 2002: 106) calls an "understanding" that elections belong to the taken-for-granted political dimension of life in modern societies. Practising voting is informed by that understanding, and thus gains in meaningfulness, while at the same time confirming the adequacy of that understanding.

Hence, a particular truth emerges from those practices. It is a truth that is less explicit and pronounced than the one conceptualised by Lefort and Gauchet, because the imaginary mode of meaning tends to highlight continuities between different social practices while de-emphasising discontinuities and contingencies. At the same time, it is a truth that is less ideologically charged than the one conceptualised by Baudrillard, because it refers not so much to a picture of the political cleavages within society as to an understanding of voting as part and parcel of democratic practice.¹

In a certain sense, then, Taylor's praxeological version of the "truth" of voting renders voting a formidably unpolitical practice. The truth of voting invokes an understanding of living in a society where elections and voting practices are a self-evident component of the institutional default mode of politics, and where participating in voting thus first of all vindicates the appropriateness of a certain social conduct-as-usual. The social inertia implied in Taylor's conception of the imaginary – which can be traced back to an interest in the absence of revolutionary political changes even under conditions where they were seemingly under way (such as after the demise of state socialism; compare Gaonkar 2002; Langenohl 2019) – thus translates into an insight into the unpolitical nature of voting, which is due to its capacity to make social sense.

Against this backdrop, the genuine politicity of voting would then consist in the truth of voting's *not* being reduced to the formal adequateness and taken-for-grantedness of practices that relate individual political

¹ On a side note, this consideration might explain the paradox that people participate in voting although the single vote has virtually no chance to make a change in the overall result.

actions to the setup of the formal political system and of social habitues. Seen from this angle, Rosanvallon's considerations, which highlight the increasing problematisation of general elections as the default mode of the political representation of society, give an example of how social forces challenge the truth of voting on the basis of its incapacitated politicity. As another example, one might think of the recent mobilisation of elections by rightist forces for delivering "anti-establishment" messages to society and the political system; in these cases, we witness an attempt to connect the practice of voting to another imaginary, namely, an imaginary according to which voting makes the sense it does not because it confirms dominant understandings of society but because it radically challenges them.

Leaving this discussion aside for the moment, we have to acknowledge that all the conceptual contributions discussed so far refer to the experience of liberal-democratic political modernism. This applies to the contributions elaborated in section 2 as well as to the notion of the social imaginary and its application to elections as suggested by Taylor. How can they be applied to the truth of elections and voting practices in state-socialist settings, where elections were neither free nor fair?² And conversely, what do the truths of state-socialist elections reveal about the general imaginary of the democratic vote? The concerns about the absent political-representative potential of elections discussed above, from Tocqueville to Rosanvallon, can be rightfully reproached for not accounting for the specificities of state-socialist elections, where a set of wholly *different* concerns concerning representation might be assumed. In contrast, Taylor offers a more formal account of the meaning of elections for society – a meaning that should not be conflated with their normative democratic functionality because it refers to the ways that voting as mundane practice is informed by understandings of the society voters inhabit. While his account might be criticised as apolitical thinking, given that he seems to reduce the political significance of voting to a societal recursivity between practice and imaginary, we might as well see ourselves encouraged to ask whether voting under state socialism, even as a practice informed by an imaginary understanding, might not have been more political than Taylor's conceptualisation of elections suggests for liberal-democratic societies. More to the point, precisely as elections under state socialism were neither free nor fair, participation in them might have been informed by understandings that did not seamlessly

² Taylor (1985: 98) seems to be of the opinion that voting in the context of political systems informed by Marxism cannot be but "a sham, a charade"; however, his analysis does not cover any empirical ground.

enter into the recursive loop of a mutually vindicating social practice and social imaginary. It is with this intuition that the present article now enters into a stocktaking of the imaginary repercussions of voting practices in state-socialist societies.

/// Doing Truth at the Ballot Station: Scenes from the USSR

Recent literature on the cultural history of elections in state-socialist societies has tried to refresh what has so far been the rather fleeting interest of political science in elections in such settings. This literature generally emphasises that “most of the 20th century dictatorships put a great deal of effort into arranging general elections and referenda.” In regard to state socialism, for instance, “the Soviet government along with other governments in the Eastern bloc countries regularly called their populations out to vote in general, equal, direct, and secret elections,” and while “with regard to influencing the composition of the parliament, or even the government, all of this remained quite meaningless,” the question of why these elections did take place all the same is still considered an open one (Jessen & Richter 2011: 9).

One answer to that question is that state-socialist governments tried to conform with expectations regarding the participation of the population in the political system – as seems to be characteristic not only of liberal democracies but of modernity in general, regardless of the regime type (*ibid.*: 20). Yet while holding elections might have improved the legitimacy of state-socialist regimes for their populations (Furtak 1990; Pravda 1978), it is difficult to establish to what degree this was the case given the absence of representative and reliable data about the population’s sentiments about elections.³ It can also not be excluded that this kind of claim to legitimacy backfired due to the obvious and hardly concealed un-free and unfair ways the elections were prepared and conducted (see, e.g., Smith 2011). In any case, historical studies argue that it would be too reductive to understand the political and societal significance of state-socialist elections solely from the viewpoint of regime legitimacy, and that it is instead necessary to look into the ways that participants in elections – not only voters, but also candidates and administrative staff – understood such occasions.

³ Before the demise of the Soviet Union, research occasionally relied on interviews with émigrés from the USSR, while being aware of the non-representativeness of the samples thus achieved (see Karklins 1986).

This section aims to shed light on these “understandings” – in Taylor’s sense of the term (see above) – of elections, because they organised voting as an at least potentially meaningful social practice (beyond its possible political functionality). The analysis will thus sort historical studies with respect to what they reveal about the orientations of the actors implied in state-socialist elections, using the example of the Soviet Union, aiming at a conceptual reconstruction of the truths about society that were mobilised and activated in those voting practices. In the following, I will discuss each of those understandings in turn.

First, Mark Smith (2011), who has analysed the campaign for the Supreme Soviet elections of 1946, exposes the contradictory appeal of those elections. On the one hand, the elections were framed by the authorities as a confirmation of the citizens’ right to exert popular sovereignty as per the Soviet constitution; yet on the other hand, the elections were equally framed as of necessity producing a confirmation of the rule of Stalin, due to whose generous initiative the 1936 Soviet constitution was passed so that the right to exert popular sovereignty could be established in the first place (*ibid.*: 74–75). The discourse of rights was thus utterly paradoxical: “Having things by right and being given them as gifts stand, of course, in opposition to each other.” According to Smith, the elections thus failed to establish a sense of having rights in the Soviet population. Yet, at the same time, they allowed people to gain a deeper understanding of the political and societal system in which they were living:

[T]his rhetoric gave citizens the chance to understand the Party on its own terms. Controlling the media and the campaign agenda completely, not needing to deal with an opposition or to concern itself with unpredictable political weather, the leading Party could communicate its ideas of choice in a clear and uncluttered way, offering ready-made rhetorical strategies that the population could learn and repeat (*ibid.*: 77).

The campaign for the elections to the Supreme Soviet thus stands out as an example of an attempt to instil and forge an understanding of general elections as being part and parcel of a polity in which the mobilisation to participate in the elections aimed at achieving popular sovereignty through the unanimous support of a pre-established regime. From the viewpoint of Taylor’s conception of the imaginary, the election campaign articulated a particular recursivity between an imaginary of society and the practice of

voting: the truth of voting became meaningful in its quality as a confirmation of the identity of society and the party state, an identity in which voting affirmed the rightfulness of the regime, which thus had every reason to allow such voting (see also Zaslavsky & Brym 1978: 371, as quoted in Jessen & Richter 2011: 23).

Second, Smith's conclusions (2011: 78) also entail the point that, although the 1946 election campaign in the USSR offered people an insight – if a disillusioning one – into the regime's claims of an identity between the party state and society, in the long term their separation in the perception of the population was foretold. Alex Pravda has argued that the development of elections, "since the mid-1960s, has been characterised by a steady leavening of the plebiscitary lump and a general spread of limited-choice elections," which he aligns with the increasing political "recognition that the most effective way to underpin political stability and maintain economic progress is to provide more institutional opportunities for the expression of different interests within the community, and closer links between the electorate and their representatives" (Pravda 1978: 172–183). Yet, sociological research has argued that during the same period, the gulf deepened between what was held to be true in public and in private, respectively. After Stalin's death, a disconnection increasingly occurred between communicative patterns in the public sectors of Soviet society (such as organisations, political mobilisation, and party affiliation) and what was increasingly consolidating as a private sphere. Thereby, the notions of public and private do not entirely match those that developed in liberal democracies – so that what was considered private also had a certain public dimension that sometimes transcended the spaces of home and domesticity, such as alternative cultural institutions or lifestyles (Ritter 2008; Voronkov 2001; Zdravomyslova 2003). For the present article, this development in state-socialist societies, which has been most thoroughly reconstructed with respect to the Soviet Union, is important because it can be argued that practices of voting contributed to that division of "private truths [and] public lies" (Kuran 1995, quoted in Jessen & Richter 2011: 25). This applies in particular to the following two characteristics of elections in the Soviet Union, which made them genuinely public affairs (in the above sense) whose "truth" was completely decoupled from understandings of truth in the private realm. On the one hand, elections were often accompanied by festive manifestations, such as concerts, dancing, amusements for children, and so forth, with participation being strongly encouraged by the authorities and their diverse organisations (Mote 1965: 72–76). Using the example of the Kom-

somol's share in organising elections between 1953 and 1968, Gleb Tsipur-sky (2011: 97) argues that “[e]lections, in parallel to other Soviet festivals, functioned to legitimize the state by offering its citizens a sociopolitical contract that provided them with the chance to receive pleasure from participating in the celebratory elements of elections,” which resulted in “an agentic, if passive, affirmation of the Soviet government.” The “contract” that is mentioned here, however, was a strictly “public” contract in the above sense, that is, one that decoupled the actual political orientation of persons from their public appearance (see Jessen & Richter 2011: 24–25). On the other hand, the procedure of casting one’s vote was often staged in a way that made voting against the option preordained by the party state a publicly visible – and thus potentially dangerous – venture: most notoriously through the practice of urging people to cast their vote in such a way that it could be seen by the local election committee and bystanders.⁴ In terms of imaginary meaning, the way that these practices of general participation were staged symbolically institutionalised an understanding of the vote as a practice of public faking, thus contributing to the imaginary separation of a realm of public “truths,” which where in effect lies, from a disconnected realm of “real” private truths.

Third, there is evidence that elections in the Soviet Union were used by voters to convey messages and demands to their (to-be) elected representatives. This occurred through a range of practices, such as pre-election negotiations between potential voters and candidates (which could take the form of demands openly voiced at campaign meetings or of negotiations in private; see Mote 1965: 56–64), or the scribbling down of demands and messages on the ballot sheets (which, in turn, could range from praises or denunciations of local politicians to the articulation of wishes and demands; Merl 2011, Bohn 2011). The leverage that could be brought to these demands was mainly the (implicit) threat to abstain from voting, which would fall back on the candidates as evidence of their inability to mobilise popular support for the ruling party. Thus, Jessen and Richter (2011: 29) state that “[a]long with petitions, election campaigns belonged to the

⁴ Although ballot booths were available, the default procedure foresaw that the voter would be handed a ballot with the name or names of the candidate(s) on it, and that she or he would immediately proceed to the ballot box to vote. Yet research is not in unison with respect to the degree of pressure on voters to publicly put their ballots in the ballot box. While Alex Pravda (1977: 177) and Robert K. Furtak (1990: 9) emphasise the pressure exerted on the individual voter not to use the booth, Georg Brunner (1990: 36) states that “according to the unanimous statements of Western observers, it has not been dangerous to use the secret polling-booth for some time – in contrast to the situation under Stalin – and those who did use it have not been reported to the electoral commission.”

communication channels used for exchanges between the ruling and the ruled on a local, micro-political level.” Seen from the conceptual angle of the social imaginary, the “truth” enacted in these practices concerns the connectivity between society and polity. Accepting that under a political regime that tolerates no opposition but grounds its legitimacy on popular support the only effective political action is to abstain from voting (Karklins 1986), the potential act of *not* voting becomes a source of instrumental power. The threat to exert political agency through an election no-show translates into a lever for carving out a “contact zone” (Pratt 1992: 4), however limited, between the political system and the lifeworld, so that voting makes the sense it does thus through enabling a “voice” option that the political system otherwise denies.

/// Conclusion: Multiple Imaginaries of Voting

In modern societies, voting and elections are the most fertile grounds for political semiosis. This applies not only to liberal democracies but to all types of regimes. The analysis of truths that orient voting practices in the Soviet Union has revealed three different such understandings: (a) understandings pertaining to the acceptance of the state-socialist non-democratic order through complying with formal expectations regarding voting; (b) understandings regarding a deepening cleavage between the practice of voting as an unusually public affair – if compared to liberal democracies – and truths to be kept in the non-public, “private” realm; and (c) voting as a channel to communicate truths about needs or demands that could not be openly addressed as demands pertaining to the polity as such.

Unlike in Taylor’s conceptualisation, then, voting in general elections is not coupled to just one imaginary of society presupposed as a truth, but to many, which may be overlapping but also persist in mutual contradiction. While Taylor acknowledges the multiplicity of “modern social imaginaries” already in the plural of the term, his references to democratic voting do not do justice to the factual heterogeneity of a practice which is neither limited to liberal democracies nor crystallises as only one recursivity between voting and the imaginaries it invokes and depends on.

The examples from state-socialist societies cited in this paper not only illustrate this heterogeneity and contradictoriness, but also invite analogies to be drawn with the contemporary problematics of general elections in liberal (or not-so-liberal) democracies. First, state-socialist elections make clear that voting does not necessarily invoke an understanding of having

a “true” choice in elections. This can be related to the recent successes of self-declared anti-establishment parties or candidates the world over, which thrive on the claim that the existing party system denies real alternatives and real choices. Second, voting may be imaginarily associated with a sphere of officialdom associated with corruption, fraud, and lies (leading to “voting fatigue”), with which alternative forms of publicity (today, most notably, online media) are juxtaposed. Third, the understanding that elections create a contact zone between lifeworlds and a political system that is otherwise closed directly relates to a prominent understanding in today’s democracies that, through voting for extremist parties or candidates, voters want to “send a message” to the established parties – an understanding which, of course, implies that those voters have no other means of communicating their demands.

In other words, the social imaginary invoked in voting practices in state-socialist societies reveals the fact that voting – which is usually held to be a core practice of liberal democracies – is a practice that can be functionalised against the ideological and organisational structure of such democracies. Thus, an analysis of elections and voting practices in state-socialist societies not only highlights the plurality and heterogeneity of imaginary truths as such, but also points to the significance of those truths in voting that fly in the face of any normative notion of democracy. It is high time to account for the non- or even anti-democratic understandings that voting practices may convey.

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/// **Abstract**

Historical and political science research into the role and significance of elections in state-socialist societies points to the variety of functions that these elections fulfilled, notwithstanding their deficiency if compared to liberal democratic conceptions such as the legitimation of the political regime and the mobilisation and socialisation of the population. This paper takes a novel approach towards the social significance of state-socialist elections, arguing that they conveyed imaginary understandings of the societies and polities of which they were part. The concept of the imaginary is discussed in conversation with Charles Taylor, who argues that public social practices are informed by mostly latent "understandings" that render them subjectively meaningful in the first place. Referring to historical research on state-socialist elections, imaginary understandings are identified that pertain in particular to the relationship between officially proclaimed "truths" and unofficial positionings towards them.

Keywords:

Soviet Union, elections, voting, imaginary, public sphere, political theory

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