

The Epistemic Benefits of Democracy: A Critical Assessment

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Word count: 4,977

1. Introduction

Democracy is rule by the people, and people sometimes make bad choices on account of ignorance. In particular, when people vote, they influence what policies are implemented in society, which is why we rightly worry about ignorance among the electorate. So are we ignorant? In an overview of survey data about the American voter from 1940 to 1994, Michael Della Carpini and Scott Keeter (1996) found that “[o]nly 13 percent of the more than 2,000 political questions examined could be answered correctly by 75 percent or more of those asked, and only 41 percent could be answered correctly by more than half the public,” and moreover that “[m]any of the facts known by relatively small percentages of the public seem critical to understanding—let alone acting in—the political world” (101-102). In what Jeffrey Friedman (2005) describes as an “ocean of findings about political ignorance” (x), results such as these are the norm. Indeed, according to Larry Bartels (1996), “[t]he political ignorance of the American voter is one of the best-documented features of contemporary politics” (194). I will assume that Americans are not unique in this respect.

That said, we cannot *infer* from widespread public ignorance that we have reason to worry about bad policy. There might be epistemically relevant features of democracies that alleviate ignorance. Indeed, this is exactly the possibility we will be concerned with in the below, although our conclusion will be largely negative: even if we consider the most promising candidates for such features, we have good reason to worry about public ignorance. More specifically, Section 2 shows that the worry remains despite the Condorcet Jury Theorem and the so-called “miracle of aggregation,” while Sections 3 and 4 widen the scope of the challenge to encompass liberal and deliberative conceptions of democracy. Finally, section 5 surveys the non-democratic alternative of expert rule found in Plato and Mill, and considers a recent case for that alternative provided by Jason Brennan in response to David Estlund’s claim that expert rule can never be politically legitimate.

2. Public Ignorance and Voting

A natural place to start when considering the challenge posed by public ignorance for democracy is with voting. There are two prominent views on the nature of voting. We have reason to worry about public ignorance on either view.

On one theory, voting involves making a *statement*, and specifically a statement about policies conforming with the general will (Rousseau 1978/1762) or being in the common interest (Estlund 1990). On this theory, there is such a thing as voting *incorrectly*. According to Rousseau (1978/1762), “[w]hen [...] a view which is at odds with my own wins the day, it proves only that I was deceived, and that what I took to be the general will was no such thing” (273). This is because “[i]f the People, engaged in deliberation, were adequately informed, and if no means existed by which the citi-

zens could communicate with one another, from the great number of small differences the general will would result and the decision reached would always be good” (194).

Several commentators have noted the similarity between Rousseau’s conditions and those of *the Condorcet Jury Theorem* (e.g., Grofman and Feld 1988; Wolff 2006). Condorcet (1976/1785) famously suggested that, provided each voter is *competent*, by being more likely than not to answer the question voted on right, and votes *independently*¹, in not just voting in the way that other people vote, the probability that the majority vote answers the question voted on correctly increases with the size of the voting group. Are voters *in fact* competent (and independent, although I will set aside that aspect here)? Condorcet himself doubted it:

A very numerous assembly cannot be composed of very enlightened men. It is even probable that those comprising this assembly will on many matters combine great ignorance with many prejudices. Thus there will be a great number of questions on which the probability of the truth of each voter will be below $\frac{1}{2}$ (Condorcet 1976/1785: 49).

Condorcet’s conjecture is consistent with the empirical data considered above. For now, however, the main thing to note is that, rather than highlighting a means to *removing* voter ignorance, Condorcet’s theorem *presupposes* that the voters are, as Rousseau put it, “adequately informed.” Consequently, if votes are statements about what conforms with the general will, public ignorance means that it is unlikely that the popular will, as revealed through voting, will track the general will.

It might be argued that this worry is unfounded on account of the “miracle of aggregation” (Converse 1990), i.e., the idea that, “[u]nder the right conditions, individu-

al measurement errors will be independently random and will tend to cancel each other out” (Page and Shapiro 1993: 41).² The problem is that, if mistaken voter beliefs tend to point in one direction rather than randomly in different directions, individual errors will *not* cancel each other out. Bryan Caplan (2007) argues that public ignorance about economics is systematic in this sense. While this does not entail that we systematically err in *other* politically relevant domains, it does put the burden of proof onto the defender of the miracle of aggregation to give us reason to believe otherwise.³

But maybe votes are not so much statements (about the general will or otherwise) as expressions of *preferences* (e.g., Arrow 1977 and Caplan 2007). And if so, it might be suggested that the question of voter ignorance does not enter the picture, since preferences are not the sort of things that are true or false. However, preferences can be more or less informed, and as a result more or less likely to be frustrated. For example, if we prefer a society where no one lives in economic destitution to one where some do, but have wildly inaccurate views about what political candidates or policies will realize the kind of society we thereby prefer, then our preference might end up frustrated.⁴ This gives us reason to worry about public ignorance, even if votes express preferences.

3. Epistemic Benefits of Liberal Democracy

If what was argued in the previous section is on point, we have reason to worry about public ignorance, irrespective of whether we understand votes as statements or as expressing preferences.⁵ It might be objected, however, that in so far as we are attracted to democracy, we are typically not attracted to it merely as a way to aggregate votes, but also as a political system protecting certain basic *rights*. In other words, what we

are attracted to is a specifically *liberal* democracy. Chief among those rights is that of free speech. Beyond being a right we want to protect on moral grounds, it might also carry with it certain epistemic benefits, assuaging worries about public ignorance.

The most famous epistemic defense of free speech is that of John Stuart Mill. According to Mill, “[i]f all mankind minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind” (2008/1859: 21). At the heart of Mill’s argument is the assumption that “[w]rong opinions and practices gradually yield to fact and argument” (24). This is a questionable assumption. Convincing-sounding falsities often win out in discussion, while unpopular truths often are rejected. This is not to say that Mill’s assumption is uncommon. Alvin Goldman (1999) argues that Mill’s argument has been revived recently among those maintaining that the truth stands the best chance of winning out in a “marketplace of ideas.” The problem, Goldman argues, is that, if we understand the relevant idea to be appealing to a *literal* market, it neither follows from economic theory, nor receives any support from the practice of the market; and if we understand it in *metaphorical* terms, it comes down to the overly optimistic idea that restrictions on speech are epistemically objectionable because more speech is always epistemically better.

In light of this, it makes sense for defenders of the epistemic benefits of liberal democracy to rest their case on a wider set of considerations than Mill does. For example, Allen Buchanan (2004) suggests that “key liberal institutions [...] contribute significantly to the reduction of the moral and prudential risks to which we are all vulnerable by virtue of our ineliminable social dependence” (99). Moral risks consist in risks of doing the morally wrong thing, while prudential risks involve the risk of

harming oneself, e.g., in the way that false beliefs might lead one to make bad choices. In order to avoid these risks in a context where we're inescapably dependent on others for information, we need to defer to reliable sources. According to Buchanan, the key liberal institutions that help us do so are (A) freedom of thought, conscience, expression and association, and opportunities for equal participation; (B) a large role for merit in the social identification of reliable sources of beliefs (i.e., of experts); and (C) epistemic egalitarianism, which involves a willingness to challenge others as well as to listen.

As for (A), Buchanan acknowledges that Mill is too optimistic, and suggests that “more specific institutional mechanisms and psychological dispositions are needed for reliable selection of true beliefs and correction of false ones” (110). The most important mechanisms and dispositions here are “effective processes for identifying epistemic authorities on grounds of merit, understood as the possession of objective qualifications, and a widespread, though not necessarily universal, limited epistemic egalitarianism” (110). That's to say that, while there is certainly something distinctly liberal about (A), the weight of Buchanan's argument rests, not on (A), but on (B) and (C) above. Let us consider the latter two in reverse order.

Buchanan spells out (C) with reference to a “widespread [...] attitude of basic moral egalitarianism” that has people “view themselves as competent to form and revise their beliefs and to give reasons capable of prompting others to form and revise their beliefs” (117). As in the case of (A), there is certainly something distinctly liberal about (C). But for a practice of epistemic egalitarianism to make for a reliable check on experts—which is required if it's to provide “a significant constraint on epistemic deference and hence on the moral and prudential risk that results from excessive or misplaced epistemic deference” (117-18)—people need to *be* competent in

forming and revising their beliefs about the competency of others, and not just *view* themselves as competent in that regard. But if so, people being reliable judges of the competency of others is a *precondition* on a practice of epistemic egalitarianism reducing moral and prudential risk, rather than a *consequence* thereof.

The upshot is that Buchanan's entire case for the role of liberal democracy in reducing moral and prudential risk rests on (B), the "merit-based competition for expert status" (106). But there is nothing distinctly liberal about (B). Science, when done correctly, assigns expertise solely on merit, as does the job market. But it's not clear that science and the job market thereby are liberal. In other words, to the extent that liberal democratic institutions generate epistemic benefits of the kind Buchanan is interested in, it's due to a practice that ultimately has nothing to do with liberalism.

4. Epistemic Benefits of Deliberative Democracy

So far, we have seen that there is widespread public ignorance, and that the Condorcet Jury Theorem, the miracle of aggregation, and liberal institutions such as free speech and epistemic egalitarianism do not serve to assuage the worries associated with such ignorance. But perhaps we need to understand the relevant liberal institutions in a broader way, as involving a deliberative process of reason-exchange among the public. This line of reasoning has been defended by deliberative democrats, and perhaps most prominently by Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson (2004).⁶

According to Gutmann and Thompson, deliberative democracy involves an inclusive and dynamic exchange of reason, wherein any output of the process is open to revision, and the process as such is self-correcting. What's good about such a process? Gutmann and Thompson point to two kinds of value: an *instrumental* and an *expressive*. The instrumental value arises out of the fact that, "when [people] deliber-

ate, they can expand their knowledge” (12), and that, “[b]y deliberating with their fellow citizens, decision-makers can arrive at better, more adequately justified decisions” (23). The expressive value, by contrast, comes about because, “[b]y deliberating with one another, decision-makers manifest mutual respect toward their fellow citizens” (22). Let us consider the instrumental value first.

According to Gutmann and Thompson, deliberation *can* expand people’s knowledge and *can* increase their justification. Given the fact of widespread public ignorance as well as of bias and power asymmetries, why think that deliberation will tend to do what it arguably can do? Here, Gutmann and Thompson appeal to “one of the most effective antidotes to both the misuse of deliberation and the neglect of undesirable forms of power politics—the use of deliberation itself to publicly expose the unjustified exercise of power” (46). So, if there’s a problem with deliberation, the solution is *more* deliberation. To see why this is implausible, consider what we want social deliberation to do in political contexts. Since politics is complicated, we can at most expect a minority of citizens to be informed—an expectation borne out in the empirical studies on public ignorance considered above. Consequently, what we want social deliberation to do is (at the very least) help the informed minority educate the uninformed majority. Is that something we can expect social deliberation to do?

In situations in which there is a minority opinion, there are two possibilities. One possibility is that the minority doesn’t submit their information, in which case that opinion cannot possibly have any influence on the majority opinion. This possibility is far from unlikely, given both the informational pressure of the majority position—leading the minority to infer that they’re probably mistaken—or social pressure associated with the risk of social sanctions against dissenters (Sunstein 2006). These pressures can be resisted, which brings us to the second possibility: the minority submits

their information. Still, the impact on the group judgment is likely to be small due to the so-called *common knowledge effect*. Daniel Gigone and Reid Hastie (1999) explain: “The influence of a particular item of information [on the judgment of a group] is directly and positively related to the number of group members who have knowledge of that item before the group discussion and judgment” (960).

In light of these social psychological facts, we should expect it to be unlikely that social deliberation will enable the minority to educate the majority. On account of informational pressures, social pressures, and the common knowledge effect, what makes a difference is not *quality* of information but *quantity* of people bringing a particular piece of information to the table. Consequently, it’s not clear that any problem owing to deliberation will tend to be corrected by further deliberation; if anything, deliberation will tend to simply *reinforce*, not educate or otherwise challenge, the majority position.⁷

This calls into question the instrumental value of social deliberation. By extension, it also undermines the expressive value of social deliberation, since Gutmann and Thompson (2004) suggest that, “[i]f deliberation tended to produce worse decision than other processes in the long run, then it would not serve the expressive purpose” (22). As it turns out, there are other, non-deliberative processes that harnesses the insight of minorities more successfully than socially deliberating groups, in exactly the kind of contexts we can expect to find ourselves in on political matters, namely ones wherein the majority is likely to be uninformed (Ahlstrom-Vij 2012). The relevant non-deliberative processes, including ones involving so-called information markets—markets aggregating bets on future or otherwise unknown events—thereby enable us to reach better decision than we would through social deliberation.⁸

The points made here about Gutmann and Thompson are likely to apply to other deliberative democrats who emphasize the epistemic benefits of social deliberation, such as Seyla Benhabib (1996), Iris Marion Young (2000) and Robert Talisse (2005).⁹ They might also extend to deliberative democrats, such as Joshua Cohen (1997), who follow John Rawls (1997) in restricting the role of social deliberation to constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice. After all, while it is controversial whether the propositions thereby deliberated over have truth-values, the fact that we lack reason to believe that the empirical results showing that social deliberation consistently favors the majority view do not generalize to *moral* deliberation suggests that those results should worry Rawlsians, particularly given Rawls's stated interest in respecting pluralism.

It might be objected that the arguments above ignore the fact that Gutmann and Thompson (2004) take deliberative democracy to be “an aspirational ideal” (37). That is, while social psychology might present those defending deliberative practices with a genuine challenge, it does not go so far as to suggest that deliberative democracy isn't *possible*—perhaps people just need some help. Indeed, Bruce Ackerman and James Fishkin (2004) have provided evidence suggesting that good information can be properly harnessed, spread, and utilized in highly controlled and monitored settings. Still, they are the first to acknowledge that mirroring the relevant conditions in actual, everyday deliberations would require “a rethinking of the deliberative process from the ground up” (5). This raises a question: If what was initially attractive about deliberation was its (presumed) epistemic benefits, and it turns out that large-scale reform is required to at all reap those benefits, why keep bothering with social deliberation? In particular, why not just let those who are informed rule?

5. Expert Rule

Plato famously defends a form of expert rule in the *Republic*, on which (1) the competent should rule, and (2) the competent are philosophers. The former claim is supported primarily by his ship analogy: like a ship, the state requires a competent captain (488b-e). In defense of (2), Plato offers a two-pronged argument. First, the alternative to rule by philosophers would be rule by sophists. The problem with the sophist is that he simply teaches whatever “convictions that the majority express when they are gathered together”, but “knows nothing about which of these convictions is fine or shameful, good or bad, just or unjust, [and simply] applies all these names in accordance with how the beast reacts—calling what it enjoys good and what angers it bad” (493a-c).¹⁰ Second, only philosophers, who are in touch with the eternal forms in accordance with society is to be shaped, do have knowledge about what is fine, good, and just, and are on that account the appropriate rulers (501b-c).

If we reject Plato’s metaphysics and epistemology, (2) starts to look questionable. However, we might still accept (1). This is the position taken by Mill (2008/1861), who defends a version of expert rule in the context of universal suffrage. His argument is straightforwardly utilitarian. While maintaining that “it is a personal injustice to withhold from any one, unless for the prevention of greater evils, the ordinary privilege of having his voice reckoned in the disposal of affairs in which he has the same interest as other people” (329), he also takes it that “the benefits of completely universal suffrage cannot be obtained without bringing with them [...] a chance of more than equivalent evil” (339). Preventing said evil requires two things: First, people are to be excluded from the political franchise unless they can read, write, and do basic arithmetic, and know some history and politics (330-31). Second, some people should be allowed plural votes on the basis of “mental superiority” (366).

Critics of utilitarianism might find Mill's argument problematic. However, more recently, Jason Brennan (2011a) has defended a version of (1) on non-utilitarian grounds.¹¹ He maintains that "universal suffrage is unjust, because it violates a citizen's right not to be subject to high stakes decisions made by incompetent and morally unreasonable people" (702). He makes his point partly by way of an analogy to a jury trial: just like an ignorant or morally unreasonable jury would lack authority and legitimacy over a defendant, an ignorant or morally unreasonable voter lacks authority and legitimate power over others. This motivates a *competence principle*, on which political decisions are to be restricted to competent and morally reasonable people. That principle, Brennan argues, is violated in the case of universal suffrage. Hence, universal suffrage is unjust.

According to Estlund (2008), the problem with Plato and Mill is that they commit what he calls "the expert/boss fallacy," which consists in inferring from someone knowing what should be done that they have political authority over those who don't. Brennan (2011a) isn't committing that fallacy; on his competence principle, competency (or expertise) is necessary but not sufficient for authority (710). Still, his account violates the requirement that, according to Estlund, accounts for the fallacy being a fallacy: the qualified acceptability requirement, on which "[n]o one has authority and legitimate coercive power over another without a justification that could be accepted by all qualified points of view" (33). Estlund doesn't specify exactly what makes points of views qualified, but makes clear that it has something to do with being reasonable (63-4). And since reasonable people can disagree about where to draw the line between the competent and the incompetent, any form of epistemically restricted suffrage violates the acceptability criterion. Brennan (2011a) grants that the restricted suffrage he has in mind violates the acceptability criterion, but suggests that

“the way in which democracy violates the competence principle is intrinsically worse than the way in which epistocracy [i.e., expert rule] violates the qualified acceptability requirement” (717). Factoring in that restricted suffrage is likely to make for better outcomes on account of the voters being competent, Brennan contends that we have reason to prefer restricted to universal suffrage nonetheless.

6. Conclusion

Public ignorance presents a genuine challenge to democracy. Moreover, that challenge (Section 1) remains in the face of the Condorcet Jury Theorem and the miracle of aggregation (Section 2), and fails to be assuaged by liberal (Section 3) or deliberative (Section 4) theories of democracy. In fact, the challenge might just be driving us towards some form of expert rule of the kind defended by Plato, Mill and more recently by Brennan (Section 5). Of course, while Brennan’s rights-based and as such explicitly moral case against the universal franchise should certainly give us pause, there being few (if any) epistemic benefits to democracy is compatible with there being ample non-epistemic benefits thereof, including *moral* benefits. As such, our negative but hopefully still constructive conclusion of our investigation is this: in so far as we want to defend democracy, we should probably not look to epistemology.

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Endnotes

¹ Ladha (1992) argues that the theorem holds even in the absence of complete independence, provided the average interdependence between votes is sufficiently low.

² See also Landemore (2013: 156-160) and Surowiecki (2004: 10) who invoke a similar explanation to account for "the wisdom of crowds."

³ See Huemer (2015), who argues that the best explanation for widespread political disagreement is that people are systematically biased when it comes to politics generally, not just economics.

⁴ Note that the relevant preferences need not be strictly *self-interested* attitudes. In fact, empirical research suggests that people tend to vote, not on the basis of narrow self-interest, but for what they perceive to be in the *national* interest (see, e.g., Funk and Garcia-Monet 1997).

⁵ This conclusion is compatible with the view, popular among economists, that “it is irrational to be politically well-informed because the low returns from data simply do not justify their cost in time and other resources” (Downs 1957: 259). After all, it might be *individually* rational for someone not to do something, even if we have reason to worry about the *social* costs of everyone not doing it, as illustrated by the case of recycling and other polluting behaviors.

⁶ See Bohman and Rehg (1997) and Elster (1998) for a sample of the wide variety of views included under the heading of “deliberative democracy.”

⁷ This conclusion remains despite Lu Hong and Scott Page’s (2004) so-called *diversity trumps ability* theorem, according to which “a random collection of agents drawn from a large set of limited-ability agents typically outperforms a collection of the very best agents from that same set” (16386). First, Hong and Page’s model does not take into account *communication* (16389) and as such has nothing to do with social deliberation. Second, as Landemore (2013) points out, since the theorem is decreasingly likely to hold as the number of agents increases, it “could seem slightly sobering from a democratic point of view favoring maximal inclusiveness” (164). Third, for the theorem to hold, the agents involved need to be, as Page (2007) puts it, “pretty smart”

(137), an assumption that's unlikely to hold in the contexts we're concerned with, in light of the public ignorance data.

⁸ For more on the epistemology of information markets, see Ahlstrom-Vij (forthcoming).

⁹ For an argument to this effect, see Ahlstrom-Vij (2012).

¹⁰ All translations from Plato are from Cooper (1997).

¹¹ By contrast, Brennan (2011*b*) defends, not the view that incompetent people should not be allowed to vote, but simply that they have a moral obligation not to.