

# Democracy or Epistocracy? A Choice Between Two Values

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In the previous article named *Importance of Voter Competence in Democracy*, I discussed the dangers posed by low level of political knowledge of citizens to legitimacy of representative democracy. While the argument presented in that article stayed within the limitations of democratic theory by arguing that justification of democratic system should be based on both procedural and epistemic grounds, in this article, I present the current debate between theories of democracy and epistocracy in which I remain neutral. For the sake of simplicity, “democracy” and “epistocracy” can be defined in the following way: while both theories accept civil rights of all citizens regardless of their competence, in democracy, everybody has political rights (the right to vote and run for office) from birth but in epistocracy, only politically knowledgeable individuals can possess these rights.

It is not entirely correct to talk about “democratic theory” since there are many competing theories of democracy, such as direct, participatory, representative, deliberative, populist, plebiscitarian, and etc. Therefore, for the purpose of this article, I will refrain from debates within democratic theories. Moreover, by assuming that readers have already possessed some basic understanding of democracy, instead of going into details, I will summarize democratic principles of two main school of thoughts in democratic theory: proceduralists and pluralists[\[2\]](#). Epistocracy, however, would be a new terminology, if not an idea in a vague form, for most readers; therefore, I feel obliged to present the principles of epistocracy as thoroughly as I can, especially epistocratic position on political rights in order to create a balance between the descriptions of both theories.

In the body part of this article, first, I will summarize what democracy and epistocracy are, and then I will highlight objections to epistocracy and their related answers. It is important to note that arguments in this article are purely normative and I deliberately exclude historical examples in order to limit the scope of the article. I will clarify my points by hypothetical examples, instead. My aim is to open a public debate among the readers rather than defending any of these theories. I hope somebody among readers will reject or defend any of these theories.

I need to say that usually defenders of democracy in this debate come up with an argument of impossibility. That is, democrats usually attempt to justify their argument that "epistocracy is impossible because if we deprive the vast majority of people from their political rights, they will revolt against this policy and there will be chaos. Therefore, for a peaceful society, we need to get accustomed to democracy with its negative sides." This may or may not be true, and most importantly, it does not matter when we discuss the value of democracy. In the eighteenth century, for instance, most people believed that democratic ideas are very dangerous to implement in a state ruled by monarchs. However, it did not mean that monarchy is preferable to democracy. The same principle can be applied here, that is, maybe we do not know whether epistocracy is possible under current political situation and we do not know exactly how to implement it. Yet, what one needs to prove is this: which one is better? And why is democracy or epistocracy preferable on normative grounds? This argument of impossibility also implies that this discussion is meaningless because epistocracy, whether it is desirable, is utopia. Nevertheless, we should not forget the importance of utopias. To paraphrase Eduardo Galeano, Uruguayan writer, utopias are like horizons even though we can never reach them; they show us that we are on the right track and they create an incentive for us to advance.

A choice between democracy and epistocracy is not an easy one.

For engaging with this issue inevitably turns into a choice between two strong values: on the one hand, "one's right to participate in decision-making process which affects his/her life," and on the other hand, "one's right not to be interfered by politically ignorant people." When we face with moral dilemmas in political philosophy, the right question to ask is not "what is the correct answer?" Neither I, nor anybody else will be able to tell you *the correct* choice between democracy and epistocracy. Therefore, you *should* decide which one is more important and by doing so, you should be able to defend your arguments on reasonable grounds.

## **Democracy**

The core principle of democracy, which is shared by all conceptions of democracy, is that each individual has a right to participate, directly or indirectly, in a decision-making process which would affect her life. By doing so, she would remain *free* while *obeying* the laws that were enacted by the legislators. Although there are many theories of democracy, virtually all theorists accept the notion of political representation. In this respect, I find it useful to borrow Nadia Urbinati's definition of *representative democracy*, which states that it is a form of government by opinion where "the citizens participate by voting and by *knowing* and *seeing* what the government does and by proposing alternative courses of action" (Urbinati 2014, 6 emphasis added). As a broad definition, this can be accepted by all democratic theorists. Nevertheless, they disagree on the justification of democracy. The question "why is democracy valuable and should be preferred to all other forms of governance?" is answered differently by proceduralists and pluralists. Proceduralist democrats justify democracy on the argument that each individual has an intrinsic value and it is immoral to deny their political rights on any grounds. In this view, all citizens have political rights simply because they were born in a particular country.

Although proceduralist democrats are satisfied with this justification of democracy, pluralists argue that “standing alone, however, the Idea of Intrinsic Equality is not robust enough to justify much in the way of conclusions – and certainly not democracy” (Dahl 1989, 84). According to this view, the Idea of Intrinsic Equality has two serious shortcomings. The first is that the amount of inequalities that this principle can tolerate is “extremely” unclear or, in other words, the border of equality is vague (Dahl 1989, 98). The second weakness of this idea is that intrinsic equality of individuals does not imply that everyone is the best judge of her own interests. And, as a result of these two weaknesses, Robert Dahl, a famous political theorist, concludes that “if a good of each person is entitled to equal consideration, and if a superior group of guardians [epistocrats] could best ensure equal consideration, then it follows that guardianship [epistocracy] would definitely be desirable, and democracy just as definitely would be undesirable” (1989, 88). In short, Dahl demonstrates that pure procedural justifying of democracy would undermine the democratic legitimacy. Therefore, democracy should be justified based on the following assumptions that it is the best form of government for maintaining the Idea of Intrinsic Equality as well as personal development and autonomy.

Even though a democratic government in itself is not sufficient condition for achieving these ends, and in practice, democratic countries do not meet all the requirements of democratic theory, still personal development and autonomy are desirable for citizens. While proceduralist conception of democracy would be rejected by epistocracy, or what Dahl calls *guardianship*, pluralist justification of democracy is immune to this threat since it is based on the claim that “in order for [individuals] to develop [their personal autonomy] among a large proportion of a people, it is necessary if not sufficient that the people govern themselves democratically” (Dahl 1989, 93). Furthermore, democracy,

according to pluralist conception, should also show that, at least, most people are able to govern themselves and they know what is best for them. As Dahl states, "democracy can be justified only on the assumption that ordinary people are, in general, *qualified* to govern themselves," and "in the absence of a very compelling showing of incompetence (...) *everyone should be assumed to be the best judge of his or her good or interests*" (1989, pp. 97, 100 original emphasis). Burden of proof lies with the claimant, the state, when it wants to replace "personal autonomy with a paternalistic authority," for example, when a citizen is mentally incapable to make decisions about her life (Dahl 1989, 101). An underlying assumption of this requirement is that if a person does not know her interests, she cannot be allowed to make decision for the all people.

Any theory of democracy need a distinction between those who are adults and able-minded and those who are not. There is no perfect and uncontroversial division in these issues. For example, voting age is 18 in most countries, and this arbitrary number for acquiring political rights is generally accepted because most people are expected to go into adulthood in their lifetimes. However, a divide on who counts as able-minded person is highly controversial since it can easily be manipulated in order to oppress the minority groups and economically disadvantaged citizens. Moreover, theorists significantly differ on what counts "competence" in democracy, that is, what the basic political knowledge is, that a democratic citizen has to know. Although it is highly debatable and controversial, some red line has to be drawn by the court, the legislature or the executive. In addition, this divide between competent and incompetent citizens has to be made on the basis of a presumption of able-mindedness (for different definitions of competence by democratic theorists see, Dahl 1989, 100; Carpini and Keeter 1996, 10-11; Estlund 2008, 228; cf. Brennan 2016, 29).

To sum up, according to democratic theories, all citizens

poses political rights from birth and these rights cannot be denied by any institution unless they manage to prove that this particular individual is not able-minded or mentally unable to make decisions on her own. Votes of all citizens count the same, which, in this view, demonstrates that all citizens, rich and poor, young and old, educated and uneducated, are equal.

## **Epistocracy**

The central principle of epistocracy, on the contrary, is that only politically competent individuals should possess political rights, that is, a right to vote and run for office, because each right presupposes a responsibility and only competent citizens can be assumed to be responsible for their actions. Epistocrats argue that some forms of epistocracy, a system in which political competence is a necessary condition for political rights, or at least a democracy with authoritative epistocratic committees, are superior to democracy if we take widespread political ignorance into consideration (Christiano 2008, 104-105; López-Guerra 2014, 3-4; Brennan 2011; 2016, 11-18). Major differences between epistocratic and democratic concepts of *competence* are that the former is much more demanding, and it claims that the claimants are citizens; thus, burden of proof lies with them. In other words, while democratic theory says that the state is responsible to prove citizens' incompetence, epistocratic theory requires citizens to prove their competence. Therefore, according to epistocracy, political rights are not birth rights and citizens should gain these rights.

Epistocracy, like its rival theory democracy, has many different conceptions but the core idea is that the vast majority of individuals do not have necessary political knowledge for participating in decision-making process. In this theory, citizens should pass a competence test in which they answer questions about government structure of their country, basic principles and theories in political science,

economy, and sociology. If they manage to answer more than half of the questions, they will possess political rights, let us say, for the next five years. If they fail, they will have a second or a third or more chances until the next election. Another method will be to distribute various number of votes to individuals based on their knowledge. For instance, if somebody correctly answers 80 questions out of 100, that person will have 0.8 vote instead of 1.0. In this regard, whether we give full 1.0 vote for a person who passes a test or we proportionately distribute votes in accordance with the correct answers, in a perfect epistocratic system, every adult citizen will be knowledgeable and they all will possess political rights.

Defending epistocracy does not mean that every political question has one correct answer and all political problems are instrumental or technical. It would be a serious mistake to assume that political decisions are short of a moral dimension. Or it does not mean that in epistocracy, people will not disagree on different policy issues. The main argument of epistocracy is that only competent citizens, who are able to defend their political views on justifiable grounds, for example, with consistent logical inferences, statistical data, and etc., should be able to participate in collective decision-making process. Everybody can learn "political facts," that is, everybody can regularly consume political information in order to be aware of "what is going on" in the country. Moreover, humans can learn to make consistent and logical decisions, and they can also learn which kind of arguments should be supported by empirical data. Therefore, epistocracy does not necessarily exclude the vast majority of citizens in politics. Instead, epistocracy *forces* all citizens, including politicians, to be knowledgeable and consistent in their arguments as well as to recognize individual rights of all humans.

It would be better to explain this point with some examples. For instance, competent citizens can disagree on immigration

policy. We can expect that both sides will reasonably defend their arguments without making factually wrong statements. However, we know that in democracies, some people are against immigration on the grounds that those foreigners, let us say Ruritarians, are rapists and criminals – an argument that is not supported by empirical data. Should these people have a right to vote for a politician, who is ready to do whatever is necessary to be elected, who promises to be tough on immigration? Or should a religious fanatic, who believes that all people who do not follow the *True God* should be punished, that is, women should be forced to cover or sex outside of marriage should be criminalized or all members of other religions should be forced to pay an extra tax and etc., have a right to vote? At the same time, should a fanatic nationalist, who believes that only members of the “core ethnic group” should possess full citizenship and state should be obliged to favor the core ethnic group over ethnic minorities, be given political rights?

Imagine an epistocratic society where all politicians know that their constituencies consist of competent individuals. Do you think that those politicians would dare to make factually wrong statements? They will understand that they have to convince competent citizens that their political platform is the best on reasonable grounds. In this scenario, a politician cannot gain votes by appealing to the masses as well as by using religious and nationalistic rhetoric or symbols. Competent citizens will not ask “which god do you believe in?” Instead, they will ask “what is your policy on economy, urban planning, foreign relations, environment, and human rights?” In short, it is undeniable that competent citizens, regardless of their disagreements among themselves, would make far better collective decisions than incompetent citizens, whose disagreements are based on unjustifiable and irrational grounds.

An epistocrat would say that we require competence in all actions that would have an effect on others’ life and we hold



individuals responsible for their wrongdoings. For example, people should possess special license for driving and nobody claims that driving should be a birth right. Since an incompetent driver would pose a threat to life and security of other people, state requires a driving exam and also punishes those who fail to drive in accordance with those rules. In this regard, voting affects the lives of other people; however, there is no punishment for "bad voting" and all adult citizens possess political rights as a birth right regardless of their competence. Why should a competent citizen accept collective decisions that are made by incompetent individuals? Why should an incompetent person, who does not know how the government or economy functions, have a right to make decisions about the government or economy? We do not, for example, trust in incompetent doctors, engineers, drivers, and teachers; also, we do not let them have a power over us – they are not allowed to make decision that affects our lives. Then why should an incompetent voter be trusted or, at least, should be given a right to vote and run for office? What makes voting different? This is one of the most important and vital questions that every democrat *has to* answer.

In order to persuade democrats, an epistocrats would say that epistocracy and democracy are not as different as they may seem. First, unlike anarchists, both sides believe that individuals are not able to cooperate and live in a stateless society. For the sake of security and flourishing life, state, that is, a hierarchical body of institution, is necessary which means that people need to be coerced if they refuse to obey collective decisions and/or enacted laws. Second, they both accept the principle of equal consideration, a moral axiom which presupposes that well-being and interests of each individual are worthy of equal consideration. Third, despite the fact that democrats are usually unwilling to explicitly acknowledge this principle, they, like epistocrats, also believe in the importance of competence when it comes to political rights. For instance, children are deprived of

political rights on the grounds of incompetence. Political theorists as well as adults in all democracies rightly believe that since children are unable to make decisions about their lives, they cannot be allowed to participate in collective decision-making process. Moreover, depriving children from full citizenship benefits them, too. This shows that indeed, democrats also accept the idea that competence is necessary for political rights. Then since empirical works of political scientists demonstrate that most citizens do not know basic things that would qualify them as competent, why should they be counted as competent citizens?

It would be a serious mistake to argue that political participation is morally neutral act. Because our votes have an influence over other people, we have a moral obligation, at least, not to vote badly. Even if our individual votes do not make much difference in a society with millions of people, we have a moral obligation not to hurt others and make bad decisions that affect their lives. In *Against Democracy*, libertarian philosopher Jason Brennan argues that, it is vital to deprive political rights of incompetent citizens in order to prevent them to “exercise political authority over” innocent and competent individuals (Brennan 2016, 17). For democracy is not a system in which every individual citizen chooses for herself. In democracy, “always some people,” hopefully the majority, choose “for everyone” in a particular country (Brennan and Hill 2014, 86). The idea that voting enables citizens to obey the laws that they made, even if they voted against, is so ridiculous that philosopher Christopher Wellman makes fun of this idea by comparing the options of a democratic citizen to that of an abductee:

Indeed, to say that citizens are bound to those laws for which they vote is morally tantamount to saying that an abductee has consented to being shot if she has expressed a preference that her abductor shoot rather than stab her (...) The two positions are importantly analogous, because neither the citizen nor the abductee can choose whether or not she will be coerced. Just

as the abductee will be killed no matter how she responds (and even if she does not answer the abductor's question), the citizen will be subjected to coercive laws no matter how she votes (and even if she does not vote) (Wellman 2005, 9).

As it is seen from this analogy, strictly speaking, liberty in democracy does not mean that you obey the laws that you made. Still you obey the laws that are made by everyone else because statistically, one vote virtually has no influence at all. In this respect, political participation in a democracy has significant symbolic meaning ("everybody is equal"); nevertheless, this reification of democracy does not lead to a conclusion that I obey my own laws. Additionally, the claim that in democracies, citizens are the authors of all laws, and; therefore, laws are not imposed on them, as they are in non-democracies, does imply that every citizen has to vote in order to remain free while obeying the laws. For abstained citizens are not, or rejected to be, the authors of laws. Ergo, democratically accepted laws are somehow imposed on abstained citizens. In this case, if we choose epistocracy, at least, knowledgeable individuals, instead of incompetent and ignorant ones, will make collective decisions and, as a result, our system will produce better outcomes for society at large.

At the end, I believe, we all should ask ourselves these crucial questions: Am I politically competent? If yes, then is it right for politically incompetent individuals, among those I have relatives, friends, and acquaintances who are decent people, to make decisions about my life? If no, then why should my politically ignorant actions have any effect on someone else's life? Where do I get the right to participate in collective decision-making process despite my ignorance? Lastly, if political competence is not a prerequisite for political rights, then what makes the latter different?

[\[1\]](#) In this article, I use some parts of my master thesis in

Heidelberg University without any self-citation. The thesis, *Rule by the Ignorants: A Criticism of Diarchic Democracy*, which defends pluralist justification of democracy by criticizing pure proceduralism, can be found here:

[https://www.academia.edu/36593433/Rule\\_by\\_the\\_Ignorants\\_A\\_Criticism\\_of\\_Diarchic\\_Democracy](https://www.academia.edu/36593433/Rule_by_the_Ignorants_A_Criticism_of_Diarchic_Democracy)

[2] I do not include instrumental democrats, those who deny the presumption that every individual should have a right to *democratic say*, in my analysis for two reasons. First, there are not many political philosophers who defend pure instrumental justification of democracy (for instrumentalist position, see Arneson 2009). Second, their arguments are somehow similar to that of epistocrats, and I am not willing to define a border between instrumental democracy and epistocracy because it is not the point of this article as well as many democratic theorists would argue that by time the former is doomed to be transformed into the latter.

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