Democratic Representatives as Epistemic Intermediaries

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Aug. 13, 2019

Forthcoming in NOMOS issue on "Democratic Failure"

Abstract

This essay develops a model of democratic representation from the standpoint of epistemic theories of democracy. Such theories justify democracy in terms of its tendency to yield decisions that "track the truth" by integrating asymmetrically dispersed knowledge. From an epistemic point of view, I suggest, democratic representatives are best modeled as epistemic intermediaries who facilitate the vertical integration of knowledge between policy experts and non-experts, and the horizontal integration of knowledge among diverse non-experts. The primary analytical payoff of this model is that it provides a clear rationale for variation in the norms and institutionalization of representative behavior. Sometimes a delegate-like approach is the right one, and sometimes a trustee-like approach is better. The key determinant is the effect of these models on the epistemic quality of outcomes under different circumstances. Towards the end of the essay, I apply the model to the present revival of populism and consider its implications in that context.

1. The View From the Fulton Neighborhood Zoning Committee

As a newly appointed member of the Fulton Neighborhood Zoning Committee in

Minneapolis, I recently had my first inside glimpse – albeit extremely limited – of the democratic

process.[1] Our little group participated in sometimes heated deliberations over Minneapolis's

"2040 Plan," a legally required document that lays out a vision for the city over the next couple

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of decades. It spells out commitments to goals such as social equity, economic growth, livability, and sustainability, and articulates in somewhat broad terms a series of initiatives towards those goals.

After submitting an initial draft of the plan to the public, the city created an extensive open-comment period, seeking feedback through various forums and media. Public input in this process has been voluminous: The last time I checked, citizens had submitted 1682 comments through online forms, along with another 250+ emailed comments, and presumably many more comments at in-person forums.[2] A very large share of these comments consist in poorly informed rants rather than thoughtful positions supported by evidence. Citizens pick out specific details and attack them without considering the broader context. They badly misrepresent what is in the plan. They ignore the interests of other constituents with compelling concerns. They make assertions about complex empirical matters without, apparently, consulting any credible research. What is the effect of building luxury housing on housing prices over all? What kinds of housing subsidies are most likely to promote an increase in affordable housing supply? How do changes in parking supply downtown affect commuter patterns? Hypocrisy and lazy/inconsistent arguments abound, and the incentives for responsible engagement are pretty weak. To be sure, one can also find thoughtful and well researched perspectives. But that is the exception rather than the norm, and the general perspective one gets on citizen-representative interchange does not flatter the democratic process.

For better and worse, the comments will surely have some effect on the ultimate outcome. Yet a large share of the people who have submitted comments will come away with the view that

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[2] https://minneapolis2040.com/received-public-comments/

the politicians and planners are "not listening" to them. They will think this because those who must weigh all of the relevant considerations will realize that acting on the stated concerns of most citizens would (for various reasons unfamiliar to the citizens themselves) be a really bad idea and because, in any case, there are too many incompatible objectives in play to accommodate all of those concerns practically. But when confronted with the difference between what they as individuals called for and the policy that resulted, many citizens will complain that their elected agents are contemptuous of the public.

The example draws our attention to some important tensions in the practice and ideal of democratic representation. On the one hand, the guiding idea of a representative system is that, in order to reliably serve citizens' interests, we need to create mechanisms through which their input is sought. Input is important on the presumption that we cannot really understand what serves citizens' interests without an egalitarian process of regular and extensive consultation. On the other hand, democratic citizens are frequently ill-informed and narrow in their sympathies and motivations. The first consideration explains, at least in part, why serving citizens' interests requires a representative system rather than technocracy. The second consideration explains, at least in part, why it requires a representative system rather than direct democracy.

My suggestion in this essay is that a representative political system presents a solution that navigates two different kinds of epistemic problems: first, the risk that citizens will be ignored; second, the risk that they will be ignorant. The first risk pulls us toward more delegate-like systems of representation: more direct forms of citizen involvement and greater deference among official representatives. The second pulls us toward more trustee-like models: less direct citizen involvement and more independence of representatives. Admittedly, the trustee/delegate distinction is a bit worn. Nonetheless, it offers a useful rubric for representing this fundamental

tension in democracy - between citizen involvement on the one hand and expertise on the other. From an epistemic point of view, I suggest, democratic representatives are best modeled as epistemic intermediaries who facilitate the vertical integration of knowledge between policy experts and non-experts, and the horizontal integration of knowledge among diverse non-experts. The primary analytical payoff of this model is that it provides a clear rationale for variation in the norms and institutionalization of representative behavior. Sometimes a delegate-like approach is the right one, and sometimes a trustee-like approach is better. The key determinant is the effect of these models on the epistemic quality of outcomes under different circumstances. Towards the end of the essay, I apply the model to the present case of populism and consider its implications in that context.

One caveat before moving forward: quite plausibly, there are significant non-epistemic considerations of procedural fairness and legitimacy which bear on the justification and character of representative institutions. Below, my working assumption is that, while procedural considerations may constrain or in some cases trump epistemic concerns, these two approaches are normally compatible. Indeed, one important upshot of my argument is that epistemic considerations are generally supportive of a system of democratic representation and, in this way, do not push us toward non-democratic models of elitism (as has frequently been argued[3]).

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[3] E.g., Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

2. The Distinctive Epistemic Challenge of Democracy

Epistemic models of democracy hold that democracy is to be recommended at least in part based on its tendency to produce decision outcomes that "track the truth."[4] Democracy's characteristic norms and procedures can then be explained and justified by reference to their contribution to this outcome. Some epistemic democrats, for example, have appealed to formal work on the wisdom of crowds to explain why democratic decision-making would beat aristocracy under the right conditions.[5] The idea of political truth invites a variety of worries that have been addressed elsewhere,[6] but on my view its significance has been overstated amongst epistemic democrats. In Joshua Cohen's classic formulation of epistemic democracy, the key notion is not political truth but, instead, the idea of a "standard of correct decisions" which is independent "of current consensus and the outcomes of votes."[7] On this view, the key consideration is a certain notion of objectivity in our understanding of good decision outcomes, i.e., a measure of normative distance between whatever decision it is that citizens actually

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[4] Robert E. Goodin and Kai Spiekermann, *An Epistemic Theory of Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Hélène Landemore, *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); David M. Estlund, *Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Joshua Cohen, "An Epistemic Conception of Democracy," Ethics 97, no. 1 (1986).

[5] Landemore, *Democratic Reason.*

[6] Estlund, *Democratic Authority.*

[7] Cohen, "An Epistemic Conception of Democracy," 34.

endorse or decide upon through the political process and what it is that would constitute a correct decision.[8] That kind of independent standard might be provided by some sort of strongly realist notion of political truth; but it might also be provided by constructivist alternatives, according to which correct outcomes are the ones that would be agreed upon under idealized conditions of deliberation, for example.[9]

In any case, for present purposes, let us say that an *epistemic* notion of democracy is one which recommends democracy, at least in part, based on its tendency to produce decision outcomes that correspond to the right objective standard. Why would democracy tend to do that? It would tend to do that, most crucially, if the kind of knowledge required to best approximate objectively correct outcomes were very widely dispersed among the citizenry. And that assumption looks quite plausible at least on certain baseline liberal assumptions: First, a basic principle of equality according to which no one's interests are intrinsically worthy of more weight in decision-making than anyone else's. And, second, the idea that citizens have a fundamental interest in their own liberty, i.e., at a minimum, a life that reflects their own non-coerced values and ambitions, consistent with a similar scope of liberty for others. Respecting these two basic principles might in principle be possible with some non-democratic model. However, as I explain below, it looks nearly impossible to attend effectively and fairly to disparate interests without a process of intensive, ongoing, and egalitarian consultation.

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[8] Michael Fuerstein, "Democratic Consensus as an Essential Byproduct," Journal of Political Philosophy 22, no. 3 (2014).

[9] Estlund, *Democratic Authority*.

So the general appeal of democratic systems lies in their capacity to integrate widely and asymmetrically dispersed knowledge about political matters.[10] Yet neither of the two dominant mechanisms of democratic agency – voting and deliberation – is likely on its own to succeed in this regard. Voting is inadequate because, on its own, it has a frequent tendency to amplify rather than remedy ignorance. If citizens individually know a fraction of what they need to know about climate policy to make good decisions, for example, the majority perspective is unlikely to represent a rational outlook. On its own, voting also does a poor job of integrating disparate information. If four voters know about four different successful business deals conducted by Donald Trump, and the fifth knows about a fifth deal in which he ripped off his suppliers, went into bankruptcy, committed tax fraud, and got bailed out with a $50 million gift from his father, then a substantial majority will conclude that he is a brilliant and ethically upstanding business man. Aggregating their knowledge through an election will not yield epistemic benefits. This point extends to complicated policy problems in which developing an informed view requires attending to disparate considerations. Whatever its epistemic merits, voting on its own is not a reliable route to the "wisdom of crowds" in political contexts.

Inclusive deliberation is a tempting solution to this problem, since deliberation enables individuals to upgrade their perspective in the light of asymmetrically dispersed information.[11] But even under the best of circumstances, there are severe practical limitations to the prospects of universal deliberation given the size of contemporary democracies and the range of challenges

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[10] Michael Fuerstein, "Epistemic Democracy and the Social Character of Knowledge," Episteme 5, no. 1 (2008).

[11] Elizabeth Anderson, "The Epistemology of Democracy," Episteme 3, no. 1-2 (2006).

they face. The "deliberative systems" approach presents an important move towards addressing that challenge within deliberative democracy,[12] but remains an incomplete solution at best. Relatedly, the ideal of inclusive egalitarian deliberation at best abstracts away from the inevitability, and utility, of epistemic hierarchies. The division of cognitive labor is essential when matters become complex,[13] and no system of decision making can succeed without some rational, structural reliance on expertise.[14]

From an epistemic point of view, then, representation most naturally enters this picture as a means of assimilating disparate input about citizens' interests into a process of shared decision-making. Representatives play a particular role in the democratic system that works in tandem with voting and deliberation to improve epistemic outputs. Andrew Rehfeld characterizes the "standard" understanding of political representation in terms of what he dubs the "interest and responsiveness" account. This involves two components:

"(i) To advance, seek, or pursue another person's or group's interests; and/or

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[12] John Parkinson and Jane Mansbridge, *Deliberative Systems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[13] John Hardwig, "The Role of Trust in Knowledge," Journal of Philosophy 88, no. 12 (1991).

[14] Alfred Moore, *Critical Elitism: Deliberation, Democracy, and the Problem of Expertise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

(ii) in a manner responsive to that other person or group."[15]

I will treat this "standard" account as a baseline for present purposes.[16] From a procedural point of view, there is a moral good achieved by giving individuals a say in decision-making. The key point is that, in a political context, there is no authoritative vantage point from which to identify correct decisions. So it is essential to avoid unjustly privileging any particular individual's view(s).[17] In this respect, there are clear merits, on grounds of fairness, to having a democratic representative system.

Nonetheless, even though the correct outcome of political processes may be essentially contested, we can legitimately critique that process for failing on epistemic grounds: the majority opinion may be supported by fallacious reasoning, it may hinge on lies or misrepresentations, it may be premised on overconfidence about poorly understood information, and it may blatantly ignore the vital interests of particular groups with a stake in the process. These are all essentially epistemic considerations, because they recruit normative criteria of reasoning and justification which are independent of actual beliefs and procedural outputs and, for that matter, moral characteristics of procedures, such as the extent to which all individuals have an equal say.

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[15] Andrew Rehfeld, "On Representing," The Journal of Political Philosophy 26, no. 2 (2018): 216.

[16] Rehfeld's objective, in fact, is to argue that, for various reasons, these conditions are neither necessary nor sufficient for representation. However, his particular concerns do not bear significantly on the approach developed here.

[17] Estlund, *Democratic Authority*.

From a procedural point of view, representation is a way of realizing the equal moral status of citizens in political decision-making. In epistemic terms, designating people to advance the interests of particular groups of citizens helps ensure that the full spectrum of considerations which are relevant to justifying policy outcomes are in fact considered. Economic policy which only consults wealthy people is unlikely to fairly and effectively serve all citizens' interests. Parallel points apply to education policy which only consults city-dwellers, technological regulation which only consults industry, and so forth. This rationale has long been a pillar of democratic thought.[18]

In particular, it is worth noting a couple of crucial reasons why – given the presumption of liberty and equality – producing correct outcomes is likely to depend on wide egalitarian consultation:

The first is that the content of any individual's legitimate interests is *desire-sensitive*. That is, following a standard liberal understanding of well-being, what is good for me depends to a large degree on what I actually desire and aspire to. Religious believers, for example, have a compelling interest in the capacity to practice their religion in virtue of their subjective attitudes towards religious doctrine and practice; caring about and engaging with these things in a particular way gives them an interest in the capacity to practice their religion. Likewise, same-sex couples have a compelling interest in the right to marriage in significant part because of the existence of genuine and deep-seated desires to participate in that institution. The defense of same-sex marriage would be incomplete without this fact about contingent human attitudes and

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[18] John Stuart Mill, "Considerations on Representative Government," in *On Liberty and Other Essays*, ed. John Gray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

affections. All things held equal, getting what we desire is generally good for us, and the contingent shape of human desires plays a fundamental constitutive role in determining our interests.

The second reason that producing correct outcomes depends on wide egalitarian consultation is that interests are *fact-sensitive*. That is, what is good for me depends substantially on features of the world beyond my subjective state of mind. If I am allergic to penicillin, then it is against my interests to take penicillin, even if I desire it or believe that it's good for me. On a political scale, manufacturing workers may believe that tariffs are going to be good for them while, in fact, they will produce unforeseen consequences which make them worse off. Wide consultation tends to be important, therefore, because citizens have an incomplete epistemic perspective on the facts relevant to their interests. A process that is properly sensitive to our interests should be one that ensures the chance for all relevant factual information to receive uptake.

The fact-sensitivity of interests entails that democracy requires an enormous body of scientific knowledge, where this encompasses natural and social-scientific, as well as other bodies of technical knowledge.[19] Democracy requires, we might say, the *downward vertical integration* of knowledge from experts into the decision-making process. The Minneapolis 2040 plan illustrates this well, since competently assessing the plan requires drawing on a vast array of economic, sociological, and ecological concerns and integrating them coherently and intelligently. There are undoubtedly some types of policy questions for which more mundane

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[19] Michael Fuerstein, "Epistemic Trust and Liberal Justification," Journal of Political Philosophy 21, no. 2 (2013); Moore, *Critical Elitism*; Philip Kitcher, *The Ethical Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011).

forms of knowledge suffice (How should we renovate park facilities? Should the school system

expand its investment in the arts?). Nonetheless, many core legislative issues hinge on complex

scientific matters. The present debate surrounding health care reform in the United States is a

telling example. This debate tends to inspire strong positions on all sides, even though there is

enormous uncertainty about the ultimate results, costs, and tradeoffs of different policies. The

difficulty of the underlying issues surpasses that of string theory so far as I can tell, yet voters are

practically screaming at their representatives (and each other) about what ought to be done.

At the same time, citizens tend to know factual qualities of their local situation which are

relevant to their interests, but which are not well known by elites operating at a remove.

Democracy thus requires *upward vertical integration* – from non-experts into the decision-

making process – of knowledge as well. The efficacy of health care policy, for example, is

sensitive to highly localized needs and sociological dynamics: who winds up in the emergency

room and why? Where are the cost-overruns most extreme? What kinds of care are most needed

and for which populations? How do racial and economic inequalities play out in the provision of

care? There is a long history of poor decision-making by policy elites who are not sufficiently

familiar with the localized conditions under which policy is to be implemented, and with the

concerns of those most directly affected by it. Education policy provides a particularly rich

abundance of examples on this point. High level reforms, such as "No Child Left Behind" in the

United States, impose sweeping measures to address problems which are enormously

heterogeneous at the local level. The inevitable result is a variety of perverse incentives and

unintended consequences, of which "teaching to the test" is (in this case) only the most notorious example.[20]

In the Minneapolis 2040 case, citizens tend to offer up perspectives grounded in what is likely to happen on their block without weighing the needs of those in neighborhoods that are different in their demographics, housing stock, transportation needs, and economic prosperity. Voters defending gun rights in a rural context seem at best dimly aware of the consequences in poor urban neighborhoods. Voters angry about environmental regulations on water usage tend to forget or ignore what happens downstream. The challenge in a political system that is supposed to treat all citizens equally is to assimilate their interests across a heterogeneous population. This is the problem of the *horizontal integration* of knowledge. We need an interchange between experts and non-experts, but we also need an interchange among different types of experts and, especially, among diverse non-experts. In this context, the problem is not only to generate a sufficient awareness of the diversity of interest-relevant facts, but also the diversity of interest-relevant desires across the population. Here again the same-sex marriage case looks like an important example. The compelling interest of same-sex couples in marital rights, I noted above, derives to a significant degree from the particular set of aspirations and attitudes attached to the institution of marriage by a substantial portion of the gay community.

To summarize: democracy is epistemically demanding because serving interests fairly and effectively requires integrating knowledge across a large and heterogeneous population. This integration concerns both interest-relevant facts – about scientific matters and also local practical

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[20] Linda Darling-Hammond, "Race, Inequality, and Educational Accountability: The Irony of 'No Child Left Behind'," Race Ethnicity and Education 10, no. 3 (2008).

constraints – and contingent desires which generate interests as a function of variable plans, attitudes, and commitments. The integration required must flow from experts toward the broader system of decision-making (*downward vertical integration*), from non-experts toward that system (*upward vertical integration*) and between non-experts at different social locations (*horizontal integration*). If, on the standard account, the fundamental task of representation is the advancement of interests, then we can understand representatives as occupying a distinctive role which facilitates these different kinds of epistemic integration. That is the suggestion which I pursue in the next section.

3. Democratic Representatives as Epistemic Intermediaries

The Minneapolis 2040 website describes a variety of means through which the public is being engaged to provide feedback on the plan throughout its development, but does not offer much detail on the actual steps by which a draft was produced. Still, we can imagine what Mansbridge calls (see this journal issue) a "recursive" process of deliberation among Council Members, the public, and the planners. A somewhat simplified version of the ideal goes like this: the perspective of elected Council Members is informed by their engagement with citizens; the Council Members in turn make some judgments about collective priorities of their constituents and channel those to the planners; the planners draw on their expertise to identify crucial practical issues, constraints, and tensions; the Council Members channel those points back to their constituents in public forums; the public then has a chance to respond; and so forth. Although, in this case, there will be no public referendum vote on the plan, it is reasonable to assume that the City Council would be unlikely to move forward with the ratification of any particular plan until a draft garners substantial public support across a range of constituencies.

The role of the public in this case is primarily one of providing feedback which is then integrated by planners, along with various technical considerations, into crafting further drafts of the plan. Taking this as a fairly standard case of democratic representation, two aspects of public input in this case are worth noting:

First, public input is collectively valuable but highly incomplete at the individual level. The value of public input tends to emerge through the accumulation of diverse perspectives that are individually incomplete on their own. In Minneapolis, developers have one particular set of issues in mind; African-American renters on the North side of town have another; white home-owners in the affluent neighborhoods in the southwestern part of town have yet another; businesses downtown will raise yet another; those who commute to work every day have a different perspective on transportation issues than those who work from home; and so on. A good planning document will integrate all of these perspectives along with a broad spectrum of technical considerations. But that is principally the task of the technocrats in the planning department – in dialogue with City Council Members – rather than one for individual citizens. Most individual citizens will be poorly positioned to perform this integrative task, due to inevitable deficiencies of both scientific knowledge and knowledge of other citizens' interests. This corresponds to the need, described earlier, for horizontal and downward vertical integration.

Second, much of the process which determines the final document takes place off stage, in the nitty gritty technical deliberations of the technocrats who set the agenda. By the time the general public reaches a point where it is positioned to exercise some kind of direct authorization, the considerations in play, the kinds of measures proposed, and the defining aims of the document will have already been substantially framed and narrowed down. There will be

no direct public vote on the planning document. Still, even if there were such a vote, the public's choice would be substantially shaped by the construction of available options.

Both of these considerations underscore the fundamental difficulty with the idea that representative democracy is an attempt to approximate, within practical constraints, an ideal of self-rule or, as Mansbridge puts it (see her contribution to this journal issue), "giving a law to oneself." The idea of citizens giving laws to themselves depends on a parallel idea of citizens adequately informed and engaged to do this competently, that is, to meet democracy's epistemic demands. That model of democracy looks most plausible in contexts like Ancient Greece, Rousseau's Geneva, or perhaps Mansbridge's small town New England.[21] In these cases, the democratic franchise applied to a manageably small group of citizens, and the geographic and population units over which authority had to be exercised was comparatively miniscule. Likewise, the kind of scientific knowledge required for policy in these contexts does not match its degree of sophistication in contemporary national contexts.

The defining features of the 2040 plan process are that individual citizens tend to be poorly positioned to make complete legislative judgments on their own. Likewise, the choices that individuals make in this case – even technical experts – are highly shaped and constrained by

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[21] Josiah Ober, *Democracy and Knowledge: Innovation and Learning in Classical Athens* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Helena Rosenblatt, *Rousseau and Geneva: From the First Discourse to the Social Contract 1749-1762* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Jane Mansbridge, "Reconstructing Democracy," in *Revisioning the Political: Feminist Reconstructions of Traditional Concepts in Western Political Theory*, ed. Nancy J. Hirschmann and Christine Di Stefano (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996).

distributed processes of agenda-setting, theory-building, and knowledge production. The conclusions of urban planners, engineers, and school administrators are themselves premised on a broader web of background theories and assumptions that have been developed within those fields, and which serve to shape decision-making in fundamental ways. From this point of view, the input of individual citizens is best understood as a certain kind of participation in a collective, but highly distributed process of inquiry and choice.[22] We shouldn't aspire to be authors of the laws because civic and political maturity requires understanding ourselves as participants in a collective, systemic process, rather than as direct authors of outcomes. The goal of democratic participation, on this view, is not that citizens be heard or exercise oversight exclusively for its own sake; the goal is that citizens be heard because and to the extent that doing so will create policies that fairly respect the interests of all.

Yet though democratic decision-making is by nature an output of the system, rather than individuals, it also clearly depends on individuals within the system who play a crucial role in bringing together disparate bodies of knowledge. My suggestion is that democratic representatives occupy an institutional location which makes them distinctly well suited to play such a role. Representatives have formal power to participate in policy decisions, and are at the same time accountable to constituents via elections. This puts them in a natural mediating position between experts and non-experts. The nitty-gritty of policy depends on scientific knowledge and, therefore, representatives must have a grip on the relevant technical considerations. At the same time, their accountability to constituents generates incentives to bring these technicalities into dialogue with the perspective of citizens "on the ground."

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[22] Fuerstein, "Epistemic Democracy and the Social Character of Knowledge."

Likewise, they must communicate the technical perspective of experts so that policy is seen by non-experts to serve their interests. Representatives also must engage in a substantial deliberative negotiation with representatives of other constituents. In this respect, they must fairly assimilate the interests of other groups in a way that is, once again, seen by their own constituents as interest-advancing.

It is important to note that the role that representatives play in this context is both informational and motivational. As described above, their informational role is evident enough: representatives create an institutional channel through which asymmetrically dispersed information is circulated. But circulating information, on its own, is only part of the challenge in improving the epistemic quality of decisions. In a variety of familiar ways, political officials, expert technocrats, and non-expert citizens are all highly imperfect in the way that they process and act on information. Most obviously, self-interest has a tendency to crowd out a due regard for the interests of others, even given full information about the stakes. But even where naked self-interest is not the rule, implicit biases, motivated reasoning, and narrow group-based affections and antipathies tend to work against the epistemic reliability of individuals. Political representatives act as significant focal points for a process of contestation that enables individuals, not only to represent information, but also to give it salience and some measure of motivational significance. Of course, as the present case of populism reveals, political representation is hardly a fail-safe in encouraging epistemic responsibility (more on this below). Nonetheless, a system of representation, backed by egalitarian norms and basic civil liberties, creates mechanisms that enable citizens to mobilize reasons and hold one another to account on their basis.

Thus, the formal power of representatives, combined with their accountability to constituents, makes them natural epistemic intermediaries: entities which facilitate the vertical and horizontal integration of politically vital knowledge. That kind of role appears to be indispensable in the context of contemporary democracy given the epistemic inadequacy (as I argued earlier) of mass voting or deliberation on its own. When representatives perform well in their role they will succeed, not only in persuading constituents that they are fairly and effectively advancing their interests, but also in fairly and effectively advancing their interests as a matter of objective fact. It is in this latter respect that the epistemic perspective is important. The ultimate criterion of whether the representative system is failing or succeeding, on this approach, is to look at the extent to which decisions correspond to objective standards of fairness and efficacy. And the appropriate norms governing representatives take on a strictly functional character: they can be assessed and calibrated by reference to their tendency to achieve epistemic improvements in the system's outputs. It is possible that there are alternatives to the representative system that might perform better from an epistemic point of view.[23] But as I argued above, the presumption of liberty and equality as foundational values creates very strong pressures towards an approach that balances wide consultation with rational deference to experts.

Thinking about representatives as epistemic intermediaries offers us a fresh way of approaching some of the debates that have surrounded representation in democratic theory. As I noted earlier, the classic formulation of that debate lies in the "trustee" vs "delegate" dispute. The essential question in that context is this: to what extent does good representation entail

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[23] Brennan, *Against Democracy*; Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

deference to the expressed desires and judgments of constituents on the one hand, versus the autonomous exercise of a representative's own evaluations on the other? Are representatives obliged principally to pursue their independent judgments about how to advance constituents' interests, tutored by their own informed understanding of the common good (a trustee model), or are they obliged principally to bring forth the concerns of their constituents as understood and articulated by the constituents themselves (a delegate model)? From an epistemic point of view, the answer is that "it depends." In some contexts, very substantial deference to the expressed views of constituents is the best way of contributing to the fair and effective service of their interests while, in others, a more independent mode of judgment and deliberation is appropriate.[24]

One obvious consideration favoring a more trustee-style role would be the relevance of highly technical considerations which are difficult for non-experts to competently assimilate to their perspective. The complex fact-sensitivity of interests pushes us toward granting representatives greater autonomy of judgment and behavior. Again, the recent debate about health care reform in the United States hinges on enormously complicated economic and human

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[24] Goodin and Spiekermann offer their own very helpful discussion of this issue and endorse a similarly pluralistic conclusion *An Epistemic Theory of Democracy*, 244-59; "Epistemic Aspects of Representative Government," European Political Science Review 4, no. 3 (2012)., though that discussion arises within the specific context of the Condorcet Jury Theorem. They are primarily concerned with the epistemic advantages of larger vs smaller bodies and do not address the way in which variations in the sources and types of politically relevant knowledge might imply advantages to one approach or another.

interactions among different components of the system. Should we be asking non-experts for

their judgments about the proper role of re-insurance, for example? What about the

determination of formularies, or the proper term of orphan drug exclusivity under patent law?

Plausibly, a tutored mini-public of non-experts with access to curated information could form

credible judgments on such issues.[25] But simply bringing forth the voice of the mass public –

serving as their "delegate" – is unlikely to serve anyone's interests. Those interests will be better

served by representatives who can operate in relative (though not complete) insulation from the

opinions of their constituents, because that kind of insulation is a better route to the integration of

interest-relevant facts in this context.

On the other hand, interests with a high level of desire-sensitivity would favor a more

delegate-like approach. A trivial kind of case might involve decisions about how to invest in

different kinds of communal amenities. Should the local park have tennis courts or a swimming

pool? Here, barring the existence of unusual complications, the interests of the community will

be best served primarily by satisfying the contingent desires of the majority, such as it is. Here

the representative should function largely as a mouthpiece for the community. The Minneapolis

2040 plan illustrates a more complex variant on this sort of example. Urban planning visions

must rely on expert knowledge. Yet they also cannot abstract away from the particularities of

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[25] Annabelle Lever, "Democracy, Deliberation, and Public Service Reform," in *Public
Services: A New Reform Agenda*, ed. Henry Kippin and Gary Stoker (New York: Bloomsbury
Academic, 2012); Philip Kitcher, *Science in a Democratic Society* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus
Books, 2011); James S. Fishkin, *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public
Consultation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

what people want from their city, what amenities they expect, what problems they see as most significant, and what kind of community life they see as valuable.

Even in a seemingly trivial case like "swimming pool versus tennis courts," things can quickly become complicated. Tennis courts and swimming pools may cater to different kinds of people with different kinds of class interests and identities. These options may have different social implications for the neighborhood in which they are constructed. What if more people in the neighborhood want tennis courts, but there is a dearth of access to swimming for low income residents? Do public parks have an obligation to provide amenities for the underserved? How should that be weighed against the majority view? Likewise, where will the resources come from to build the pool/tennis court? Is this community in competition with another community for these resources? Who has the more compelling claim and why? Representatives who simply channel whatever is believed by the better portion of their constituents are unlikely to attend adequately to the broader context as they consider how to advance those constituents' interests.

From an epistemic point of view, most policy matters of interest will require moving between a trustee- and delegate-style role of deliberation. The particular interest that citizens have in a good education, for example, depends in part on their conception of the good life and where/how education fits within that. For this reason, successful representation requires channeling and understanding citizens' core desires as they relate to a good life. At the same time, designing a good education policy also requires attending to an institutional and scientific understanding of teaching models, the social dynamics of the classroom, budgetary and other practical constraints, and competing demands on resources. Similar kinds of points can be made in the context of health care, economic, or housing policy.

Contributing to system outcomes that fairly and effectively serve interests in most cases requires moving between delegate- and trustee-styles of behavior. A rigid dichotomy between these two approaches is difficult to reconcile with the wide variation among policy challenges and the kinds of intuitions that these disparate cases generate. An epistemic understanding of representation offers a clear account of this variation, and a justification for pluralism in our approach: if the goal is policy outputs which fairly and effectively serve interests, then different combinations of these two models are called for on different policy occasions among different publics. Epistemic output has fact-sensitive dimensions, which is why simply channeling public attitudes will not do. At the same time, it has desire-sensitive dimensions, which is why pure trustee-models will not do either.

Similar points apply in reference to other proposed models of representation. For example, drawing on Mansbridge's terminology, is the proper approach to representation "anticipatory," "promissory," "gyroscopic," or "surrogacy"?[26] As she herself suggests, the answer is plausibly that "it depends." In some cases, it may be best for representatives to act as "gyroscopes" who are selected on the basis of core values and dispositions, and who then act more or less independently of their constituents' day-to-day judgments. That model sounds most plausible in contexts where a more trustee-like mode of engagement is appropriate. "Promissory" models of representation – in which representatives are accountable to the particular set of commitments on which they were elected – may be most appropriate in cases where warranted confidence in the motives of representatives is low. "Surrogate" representation – in which the shared social

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[26] Jane Mansbridge, "Rethinking Representation," American Political Science Review 97, no. 4 (2003).

identity of representatives and constituents is particularly significant – is attractive in contexts where there are strong identity-based disparities in power and interests, and where there are strongly desire-sensitive interests in play.

Does good representation, as Suzanne Dovi suggests, fundamentally require preserving and promoting the autonomy of constituents to contest the decisions of representatives?[27] From an epistemic point of view it undoubtedly does, primarily because such contestation facilitates a regular transfer of knowledge between constituents and their representatives. Nonetheless, the idea of autonomy on its own substantially underdetermines the form and extent of contestation. To what degree should citizens be directly involved with the legislative process as opposed to granting appointed technocrats the discretion to operate behind closed doors? Thinking about representation in epistemic terms allows us to answer this question by looking at the epistemic quality of the system's decision outputs, and provides a clear justification for variation in the norms and institutional structure of representation.

4. The Epistemic Failures of the New Populism

In the terms considered above, one way of thinking about representatives who "don't listen" is to say that there have been important failures of upward vertical integration in the epistemic system. This is at least very plausibly true in the context of recent populist movements. The core populist grievances have revolved around the economic and social effects of globalization. And while these grievances are partially grounded in falsehoods or severe distortions, there is also some legitimacy to them. In the United States, a cluster of familiar considerations include:

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[27] Suzanne Dovi, "Good Representatives Foster Autonomy," PS: Political Science and Politics 51, no. 2 (2018).

the increasing economic precariousness of lower and middle class workers,[28] labor displacement resulting from technology and globalization,[29] rising social and economic inequality,[30] the dismantling of unions,[31] and the asymmetric (Wall street vs "main street") political response to the 2008 financial crisis.[32] The idea that Trump offers a credible remedy to these problems is at best highly problematic, but the underlying grievances themselves reflect genuine failures of representation. In general, the American representative system has been systematically unresponsive towards the concerns of lower-income voters.[33] There is truth in the view that

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[28] Jacob S. Hacker, *The Great Risk Shift: The New Economic Insecurity and the Decline of the American Dream*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[29] David Autor, "The Polarization of Job Opportunities in the Us Labor Market: Implications for Employment and Earnings," Community Investments 23, no. 2 (2010).

[30] Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez, "Inequality in the Long Run," Science 344, no. 6186 (2014).

[31] Megan Dunn and James Walker, "Union Membership in the United States," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [Online], https://www.bls.gov/spotlight/2016/union-membership-in-the-united-states/pdf/union-membership-in-the-united-states.pdf

[32] Neil Barofsky, *Bailout: An inside Account of How Washington Abandoned Main Street While Rescuing Wall Street* (New York: Free Press, 2012).

[33] Larry M. Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

Trump's voters – at least the less affluent and less educated among them - have been "forgotten."[34]

What explains this representational failure? In puzzling over the massive under-representation of working class voters in American policy, Larry Bartels finds little support for what might otherwise seem to be plausible explanations of this phenomenon: that the wealthy are more informed or that they vote more. The most straightforward explanation of available data, he speculates, may simply be the over-powering significance of money in funding electoral campaigns (though he notes the lack of clear evidence on this point).[35] Nicholas Carnes observes

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[34] Not all of Trump's support is working class, of course. In the general election, only 35% of Trump voters had household incomes less than $50k, and some have argued on this and related grounds that the idea that Trump's base is working class is a myth. See Nicholas Carnes and Noam Lupu, "It's Time to Bust the Myth: Most Trump Voters Were Not Working Class," The Washington Post, June 5, 2017 [Online], https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/06/05/its-time-to-bust-the-myth-most-trump-voters-were-not-working-class/. However, Trump's political narrative is undeniably pitched in important respects towards the white working class, and his victory was critically propelled by shifts in support among this group. Nate Silver's analysis, for example, supports this claim with a focus on education levels: "Education, Not Income, Predicted Who Would Vote For Trump," FiveThirtyEight, Nov. 22, 2016 [Online], https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/education-not-income-predicted-who-would-vote-for-trump/. See also Stephen L. Morgan and Jiwon Lee, "Trump Voters and the White Working Class," Sociological Science 5 (2018).

[35] Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age*, 267.

that working class citizens have never held more than 2% of Congressional seats in the United States.[36] Pointing to systematic differences in the values and policy outlook of rich and working class citizens, he argues that the United States government has long been, in effect, a government "by the rich for the rich."

And why do the rich govern "for the rich"? There are undoubtedly both motivational and informational issues in play. Motivationally, class affiliation shapes our values and our perceptions of what matters and why. Those who are more affluent and educated are likely to develop substantially different views about the appropriate policy course.[37] And yet the more and less economically well off are also likely to have different pools of information about economic policy and its effects, insofar as that information is drawn from life experience and social networks. These informational and motivational effects are not independent: caring more about the predicament of low-wage manufacturing workers is likely to induce one to gather more information about that predicament; and having more information about that predicament makes it more likely that one will care about it.

One example of particular relevance here concerns the economic consequences of low-skilled immigration in sectors such as farming and manufacturing. Here is a somewhat speculative account of what is going on in that case. On the one hand, the policy establishment

[36] Nicholas Carnes, *The Cash Ceiling: Why Only the Rich Run for Office and What We Can Do About It* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

[37] Nicholas Carnes, *White Collar Government: The Hidden Role of Class in Economic Policy Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

tends to emphasize the positive benefits of low-skilled immigration for economic growth.[38] On the other, populists focus on wage suppression, arguing that immigrants are "stealing jobs." As George Borjas argues, however, both of these arguments are in some sense right: low-wage immigration is beneficial to the economy in the aggregate, but also tends to reduce the wages of low-skill native workers in the relevant industries by a few percentage points.[39] To an affluent citizen, of course, a 2% drop in the wages of poultry plant workers may look like a small price to pay for higher aggregate growth. For those already struggling to make ends meet, however, a 2% wage cut may be very significant indeed. The approach of U.S. economic policy appears to have been much more sensitive to the perspective of a typical affluent citizen in this regard.[40] And that plausibly reflects an interplay between motivational elements on the one hand – more affluent citizens just don't find a 2% wage drop among the working class to be particularly significant – and informational on the other – those who haven't felt the acute economic

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[38] See, for example, Eduardo Porter, "The Danger From Low-Skilled Immigrants: Not Having Them," The New York Times, Aug. 8, 2017 [Online], https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/08/business/economy/immigrants-skills-economy-jobs.html; Lena Groeger, "The Immigration Effect," ProPublica, July 19, 2017 [Online], https://projects.propublica.org/graphics/gdp.

[39] George J. Borjas, *We Wanted Workers: Unraveling the Immigration Narrative* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2016).

[40] For a particularly rich analysis along these lines, see Michael Lind, "The New Class War," American Affairs 1, no. 2 (2017).

vulnerabilities of low-skill workers may easily dismiss their concerns as mere racism without attending carefully to the economic facts.

In this respect, the representative system is very clearly failing in its role as epistemic intermediary, and the rise of populism reflects that failure. Recent economic policy has not fairly and effectively served the interests of less educated and less skilled workers, and in this respect those workers are not being heard. However, there is a second problem at work in this context. The problem is that the people complaining about not being heard are themselves not listening to others. On any number of issues, scientific and social-scientific authority is conveniently ignored or twisted in politically convenient ways. Journalists who report ideologically inconvenient facts are disparaged and threatened, and the idea of truth itself is often treated as a sort of political game.[41] Indeed, this attitude toward experts, facts, and expertise is one of populism's definitive features,[42] and particularly of American populism. The epistemic quality of voters has always been shaky at best.[43] What's particularly striking about the present moment is the extent to which ignorance is a kind of willful and explicitly endorsed state.

Most obviously, there is ignorance among populist voters of important scientific facts which bear on interests. Believing that climate change is a "hoax" does not make it any less harmful to future generations. There is also ignorance of the disparate desires and particularities that define

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[41] Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).

[42] Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

[43] Ilya Somin, *Democracy and Political Ignorance: Why Smaller Government Is Smarter*, 2 ed. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

interests across much of the population. Populists tend to focus on the concerns most salient to a particular demographic group of "true" Americans (or English, Hungarians, Italians, etc.) with little regard, and often active contempt, for the expressed concerns of large classes of their fellow citizens.[44] To some degree, this can be seen as a failure of sympathy or moral motivation as much as ignorance. But the complex of strong out-group hostility also sustains patterns of cognition and epistemic negligence which are constitutive of ignorance. Populism is to a large degree defined by patterns of affect and epistemic cognition which are mutually reinforcing.[45] This point supports the idea that, as I have noted, systems of representation produce epistemic goods through both informational and motivational mechanisms: they create a means for disseminating information, but they also create a system of friction and contestation that encourages some measure of deliberative accountability.

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[44] Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); William A. Galston, *Anti-Pluralism: The Populist Threat to Liberal Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018). While the more racist and xenophobic corners of Trump's constituents are egregious in this respect, I don't think they are alone in their ignorance of other citizens' interests. Cosmopolitan urbanites surely have their own failings to understand the origins of rural, working class anger at the social and economic status quo. For a particularly compelling account, see Joan C. Williams, *White Working Class: Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2017).

[45] Richard C. Fording and Sanford F. Schram, "The Cognitive and Emotional Sources of Trump Support: The Case of Low-Information Voters," New Political Science 39, no. 4 (2017).

Thus, if it is problematic that policy-makers and representatives are out of touch with important concerns of certain sectors of the public, then it is at least as problematic that "ordinary" constituents are themselves proudly ignorant of essential scientific facts, and likewise seem unable to represent the pressing concerns of other social groups. This point applies broadly across democratic citizens, but is particularly compelling in the case of populism, which (a) explicitly rejects the authority of scientific experts and (b) is organized around forms of out-grouping that degrade and marginalize the concerns of entire social classes. So ignorance works in both directions between the "elites" who populist voters resent and those voters themselves. The policy outlook of elites has not been adequately shaped by the concerns of populist voters and, at the same time, those voters have not been adequately informed by elites' knowledge. These voters are ignored, but they are also ignorant. This dynamic is one central driver of the present democratic failure.

Contrary to Pepe Grillo and other populists, representatives are not and should not be a direct voicebox for "what you want." That is because the epistemic challenge of democracy entails a correlative duty of listening and absorbing information from technical experts, along with others outside one's district and/or social group. As I have been suggesting, institutions of representation work well when they counter the inherently limited perspective of both non-expert constituents and technocratic policy designers.

How should we think about these observations in light of the epistemic model of representation that we have been considering? Mansbridge points to Michael Neblo, Kevin

Esterling, and David Lazer's work with e-townhalls[46] as an example of how high quality constituent-representative communication could be implemented. She also mentions deliberative polling as an important model along these lines. Both of these examples involve highly structured forums for input in which citizens engage with high quality expert information and are obliged to listen and respond in a thoughtful manner. The benefit of communication in these contexts depends as much on the pro-social incentives and engagement created as the way in which information is transferred. In other words, the primary problem solved is not that citizens are ignored but that they are ignorant. The deliberative forum encourages them to become engaged and informed, and to exercise appropriate deference to those who know more than they about technical matters.

The examples of deliberative polling and e-townhalls suggest that there are potentially powerful complementarities between institutional mechanisms which facilitate upward, downward, and horizontal epistemic integration at the same time. The complementarities exist because the institutional structure of high quality deliberation strongly encourages the disposition both towards listening and towards rational deference to credible authority. Democratic representation is not intrinsically necessary to facilitate that kind of process. Nonetheless, as I noted earlier, representatives create a formal target for the uptake of relevant perspectives into the decision-making process. In that way, the existence of representatives creates an institutional context for mutual engagement that would not exist in an undemocratic system, but which would also not be scalable and sustainable in a purely plebiscitary democracy.

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[46] Michael A. Neblo, Kevin M. Esterling, and David M.J. Lazer, *Politics with the People: Building a Directly Representative Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

However, the general lesson of this paper has been that there is no completely generalizable model for an epistemically healthy model of representation, and this clearly applies to an assessment of recent populism. Those critical of populist movements tend to emphasize ways in which the participants in those movements are ignorant, while those supportive of those movements tend to emphasize the ways in which they are ignored. The first of these perspectives tempts us with a push towards more technocratic and trustee-like models of democratic governance, while the second of these perspectives tempts us with more direct and delegate-like models of democratic rule.

From an epistemic point of view, we should look with skepticism toward both of these proposals. When technocratic policy-making becomes badly decoupled from the every day perspective of citizens, failures of interest representation are inevitable, and the plight of low wage workers in advanced economies illustrates this point well. Yet sometimes the issues at hand are sufficiently complex that it is epistemically rational to keep the public at a certain technocratic remove. Establishing more robust forms of public input, engagement, and contestation is not always instrumental to improving the fair and effective representation of interests, and this explains why Grillo's "mouthpiece of the people" model of representation is a mistake.

It is likely that, in some cases, a purely epistemic approach would push us past the dividing line between democracy and something more elitist. In those instances, as I noted in my introduction, I accept that considerations of procedural fairness might kick in as a valid constraint on epistemic objectives. A culture in which officials are accountable to citizens and obliged to explain and justify their use of power is plausibly quite valuable even if it is

epistemically sub-optimal.[47] The argument above is not premised on any precise view about

how the interaction between procedural and epistemic concerns operates. I will only note that, at

least conventionally, the general mandates of democratic procedural fairness are compatible with

enormous variation in the degree and type of technocratic delegation. Even apart from concerns

about procedural fairness, the case of Grillo illustrates more pragmatic reasons for ensuring that

citizens have some basic measure of voice in the process: when people believe that no one is

listening to them, they will get pissed off and obstruct the democratic process. So my point

against Grillo is not that we should ignore the intrinsic and pragmatic value of citizens'

participation in the process; it is that we should not treat these as definitive of our model of

representation.

  If citizens learn to embrace a democratic ideal that treats their involvement and direct

authority as always and everywhere desirable, then achieving a healthy division of cognitive

labor will become difficult, and society will need to continually soothe anxieties from the

perceived unheard. Populism thrives on a misguided epistemic egalitarianism, and transforms

one important mechanism in democracy – citizen input and oversight – into a singular objective

that crowds out other goods worth protecting. Political and civic maturity require a recognition

that it is sometimes imperative to speak and be heard, and other times better to stand back and

listen. A theory of representation should be able to accommodate and explain this point.

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[47] I thank Daniel Viehoff for pressing this concern on me.