For a special issue of *Episteme*.

Betting Democracy on Epistemology

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Abstract: In this paper, I examine two major challenges to epistemic theories of democracy: "the authority dilemma" and "the epistemic gamble." The first is a conceptual challenge, suggesting that epistemic democracy is inherently self-undermining. The second is a normative challenge, asserting that the case for democracy should not rely on precarious epistemic grounds. I argue that both challenges fail. Thus, epistemic theories of democracy escape two of the most popular objections to this view.

> The democratic process is a gamble on the possibilities that a people, in acting autonomously, will learn how to act rightly.
>
> —Robert Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*

Introduction

What does democracy have to do with epistemology? According to many thinkers, not much.[1] A democracy aspires to be a community of free and equal citizens, with procedures designed to embody moral values such as fairness, equality, and respect. For instance, Thomas Christiano argues that democracy is intrinsically valuable because it treats people as equals.[2] Specifically, it provides citizens with an equal opportunity to influence political decisions and shape their own political lives.[3] Others assert that democracy is valuable because it prevents domination, upholds the collective autonomy of its citizens, or fosters an inclusive and free society.[4] These perspectives all express the legitimacy, authority, or value of democracy in *non-epistemic* terms.

1. Pettit 2012; Posner 2003; Rawls 1993; Urbinati 2014; Waldron 1999.
2. Christiano 2008.
3. Griffin 2003; Kolodny 2014; Lafont 2020; Viehoff 2014.
4. Pettit 2012; Dahl 1989; Young 2002.

In recent years, a growing number of thinkers have begun advocating for democracy on *epistemic* grounds.[5] This shift has been referred to as the "epistemic turn" in democratic theory.[6] These epistemic theorists argue that politics is not only about following procedures that treat citizens as free and equal but also, and perhaps primarily, about ensuring that these procedures lead to informed and wise decisions that benefit society. According to these "epistemic democrats," democratic processes like deliberation and voting are valuable because of their epistemic advantages. They contend that democracy can guide us to the right decisions by aggregating votes, fostering inclusive deliberation, or both.

These epistemic theories are not without criticism. Some argue that the epistemic benefits of democracy are overstated and that democratic processes can sometimes lead to irrational or suboptimal decisions.[7] For instance, voters may lack the necessary knowledge to make informed decisions on complex issues, or they may be swayed by populist rhetoric or misinformation. Furthermore, some critics argue that the emphasis on epistemic considerations can lead to an instrumentalization of democratic values. If the value of democracy reduces to its epistemic outputs, then other important democratic principles—such as equality, autonomy, and respect for individual rights—may be sacrificed in the pursuit of epistemic efficiency.

In this paper, I explore two popular challenges to epistemic theories of democracy. In §1, I provide a more detailed explanation of epistemic democracy, focusing on its descriptive and normative commitments. This provides a foundation for the subsequent analysis of epistemic theories. In §2, I present the first challenge to epistemic accounts of democracy, "the authority dilemma." This challenge questions the coherence of epistemic democracy, suggesting that democratic decision procedures cannot be coherently justified on epistemic grounds. In §3, I attempt to answer this challenge. In §4, I address a second challenge against epistemic democracy, which I call "the epistemic gamble." This challenge argues that it is fundamentally problematic to base the case for democracy on contingent and potentially dubious empirical assumptions about its epistemic merits. In §5, I explain why this challenge fails.

1 Epistemic Theories of Democracy

Historically, the epistemic value of democracy has been defended most notably by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Marquis de Condorcet, John Stuart Mill, and John Dewey.[8] Contemporary advocates of epistemic democracy include Elizabeth An-

5. Anderson 2006; Cohen 1986; Estlund 2008; Goodin and Spiekermann 2018; Landemore 2012; Talisse 2009.
6. Jörke 2010; Landemore 2017; Palumbo 2012.
7. Brennan 2016; Caplan 2007; Somin 2016.
8. Condorcet 1785; Dewey 1927; Mill 1859; Rousseau 1762.

derson, David Estlund, Hélène Landemore, Robert Goodin, and Kai Spiekermann, among others.[9] While these thinkers defend views that differ significantly in their details, they all endorse the following central idea: *unless democracy has epistemic value, there is no adequate case for its legitimacy.* This is the core thesis of epistemic democracy.

Why think democracy has epistemic value? Mill argues that inclusive democratic deliberation affords citizens the "opportunity of exchanging error for truth" and the chance of acquiring a "livelier impression of truth."[10] Dewey emphasizes the crucial role of bringing citizens together to identify and solve problems of public interest, recognizing the collective wisdom that emerges from diverse perspectives.[11] More recently, Estlund has advanced the idea that democracy derives its authority from the epistemic benefits of public deliberation, which enhances our collective ability to track the truth.[12] Building on this foundation, Landemore develops the Aristotelian idea that democracy has epistemic advantages because it maximizes the cognitive diversity of its citizens, which is brought to bear on collective problems in the face of uncertainty.[13] Viewed through this epistemic lens, a thriving democratic system enables us to pool widely dispersed information, refine the quality of our opinions through robust debate, and ultimately make decisions that are grounded in facts and well-reasoned arguments.

I will focus on the standard interpretation of epistemic democracy, which characterizes the epistemic goal of democracy in terms of *truth*. Here are some representative statements of this view:

> "The aim of democracy is to 'track the truth'."[14]
>
> "Democracy is well-suited for tracking the independent truth."[15]
>
> "Democracy is a good collective decision-making procedure because…it maximizes our collective chances to make the right choices."[16]

As these quotes illustrate, the standard conception of epistemic democracy emphasizes the capacity of democratic processes to discover and adhere to truth. (I will assume for the sake of argument that there are such truths in politics, at least in

9. Anderson 2006; Benson 2024; Cohen 1986; Estlund 2008; Goodin and Spiekermann 2018; Landemore 2012; Misak 2002; Nino 1996; Talisse 2009.
10. Mill 1859: 21.
11. Dewey 1927.
12. Estlund 2008.
13. Landemore 2012.
14. List and Goodin 2001: 277.
15. Müller 2018: 1268.
16. Landemore 2012: 2.

the "weak" sense that some political choices can be made well or badly.[17])

Alternative epistemic theories may prioritize different goals. For instance, Gerald Gaus advocates an epistemic strategy that aims at yielding *justified beliefs*.[18] Dewey posits that successful decision-making isn't about "tracking" or "corresponding" to political truth, but rather about our own reflective satisfaction with the practical results.[19] Additionally, I have previously argued that *empathetic understanding* should be considered a valuable goal of democratic deliberation, distinct from the pursuit of truth.[20] These perspectives demonstrate that epistemic democracy need not be solely concerned with truth. However, this paper focuses on the standard truth-tracking interpretation of epistemic democracy, as it remains the most common and influential approach in the literature.[21]

Epistemic theories are typically contrasted with *procedural* accounts of political legitimacy.[22] Proceduralists argue that democracy's legitimacy resides in the procedures it follows and the principles it expresses, not the outcomes it produces. The core tenet of proceduralism is that certain methods of decision-making or distributions of political power are inherently good, just, or legitimate, regardless of the results they yield. From this perspective, the value of democracy stems not from its ability to consistently arrive at the "correct" decisions, but rather because it embodies and upholds the fundamental principles of equality, fairness, and respect for individual autonomy. Proceduralists argue that by adhering to democratic processes such as free and fair elections, open deliberation, and the protection of civil liberties, a political system can claim legitimacy regardless of the specific policies or outcomes it generates.

One of the key advantages of proceduralism is that it avoids controversial assumptions about what constitutes the "correct" or "best" political outcomes. By focusing on the fairness and inclusivity of the decision-making process rather than the specific content of the decisions themselves, proceduralism provides a framework for managing disagreement and ensuring that no single perspective dominates at the expense of others. This is particularly important in pluralistic societies where citizens hold a wide range of beliefs, values, and preferences.

I find procedural defenses of democracy compelling. However, for this paper, I will set proceduralism aside to focus on epistemic theories. Although I do not endorse epistemic democracy as it is conventionally understood, I believe this view has often faced unfair criticism. My aim is to defend epistemic theories of democracy from what I consider misguided objections, despite my own reservations about

17. Landemore 2012: 210.
18. Gaus 1996.
19. Fuerstein 2021.
20. Hannon 2020.
21. For an overview of the epistemic aims of democracy, see Siscoe 2023.
22. Christiano 2008; Cohen 1989; Griffin 2003; Kolodny 2014; Rawls 1993; Waldron 1999.

these theories. By doing so, I hope to improve the discourse surrounding epistemic democracy and pave the way for more substantive critiques. Ultimately, I will propose what I believe to be a more effective approach to critiquing epistemic theories of democracy.

Epistemic theories of democracy rely on two key theses:

> **The Normative Thesis**: To be legitimate or justified, democratic procedures must have epistemic value.
>
> **The Descriptive Thesis**: Democratic procedures do have epistemic value, i.e., they tend to track the truth.

These two theses are separable. You might accept both the descriptive and normative theses, or reject both theses, or accept one and reject the other.

If you accept both theses, then you are an epistemic democrat. You think, "Democracy *is* legitimate or authoritative *because* it has epistemic value." If you reject both theses, then you are likely a proceduralist. You think, "Democratic procedures are not epistemically valuable, but that doesn't matter!"[23] If you accept the normative thesis but reject the descriptive thesis, then you might endorse epistocracy. You would think, "Democracy is flawed because it gives political power to the epistemically incompetent; it should be replaced by a more reliable system." If you accept the descriptive thesis but reject the normative thesis, then you are likely a proceduralist who nevertheless acknowledges the epistemic value of democracy. You'd think, "Yes, democracy is epistemically better than other political arrangements, but that's not what matters!"

In the literature on political legitimacy, the primary dispute between proceduralists and epistemic theorists centers on the normative thesis. Epistemic democrats contend that democratic processes should be evaluated based on their ability to track the truth, while proceduralists reject this claim. The central question in this normative debate is how we should balance epistemic considerations against other factors when assessing the legitimacy of democracy.

Another crucial debate focuses on the descriptive thesis, which posits that democracy has epistemic value. This issue is part of a broader empirical debate about the actual outputs of democratic processes. Epistemic democrats argue that democratic procedures, such as public deliberation and voting, produce epistemically good outcomes. This claim is widely contested. Jason Brennan asserts that political

23. Alternatively, you might think democracy is instrumentally valuable for non-epistemic reasons, such as promoting social stability, protecting individual rights, or fostering a sense of collective self-determination. However, I will set views of this kind aside to focus on the contrast between epistemic theories and procedural theories.

participation can exacerbate biases, prejudices, and polarization among citizens.[24] Ilya Somin argues that citizens are too ignorant for democracy to result in epistemically good outcomes.[25] The descriptive thesis remains a highly contentious and actively debated issue in contemporary scholarship.

Having outlined the key tenets of epistemic theories of democracy, including their descriptive and normative commitments, I will now turn my attention to what I consider the two most common objections to these theories. The first is a conceptual puzzle according to which epistemic democracy is inherently self-undermining. The second is a normative challenge, asserting that the case for democracy should not be predicated on the precarious epistemic grounds.

2 Is Epistemic Democracy Self-Undermining?

In this section, I will outline a basic puzzle for epistemic theories of democracy.[26] Fabienne Peter calls it "the authority dilemma," which she summarizes as follows:

> **The Authority Dilemma**
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> For those areas of decision-making where there is third-personal epistemic authority, we either follow those who know what the correct decision is, in which case our decision-making is not democratic, or we insist on democratic decision-making, in which case we can't defend the legitimacy of democracy on epistemic grounds.[27]

Let's unpack this a bit. Why does Peter believe that democracy cannot be defended on epistemic grounds?

Her argument is as follows. If epistemic democracy is sound, there must be a procedure-independent standard for the correctness of outcomes. But to justify democracy on epistemic grounds, we must first be able to identify the appropriate epistemic standard of judgment. Specifically, there must be an individual or group who possesses the authority to make claims about which democratic decisions are correct; otherwise, we would have no way of ascertaining whether political institutions are truly justified. But this requirement would make democratic decision-making either redundant or non-epistemic. If we defer to those

24. Brennan 2016.
25. Somin 2016.
26. I will concentrate strictly on instrumentalist epistemic theories, which maintain that political institutions and procedures derive their justification from their capacity to generate epistemically good outcomes. I will set aside non-instrumental epistemic theories, such as Peter's (2008) pure epistemic proceduralism, which locate the epistemic value of democracy in the procedural features themselves rather than in the outcomes they produce.
27. Peter 2016: 138.

who know what the correct decision is, then our decision-making process is not genuinely democratic (and also redundant). Conversely, if we instead insist on the democratic decision-making process itself, then we're not really defending democracy on epistemic grounds.[28]

To illustrate this dilemma, Peter gives the following example:

> **The Town Bridge**
>
> Suppose a town is considering the plan to build a new bridge across the river that runs through it. The decision on whether or not to build the bridge depends only on one factor, namely on the stability of the planned bridge. And suppose the town engineer has the expertise to assess whether the planned bridge is stable and concludes that it is.[29]

In this situation, a democratic decision would be bad. The town engineer is a known expert, so his verdict should be sufficient to legitimize the decision to build the bridge. It would be pointless and dangerous to seek a democratic decision on whether or not the bridge is stable. Thus, there is no epistemic case for democracy when considering the planned bridge. As Peter says, "If there is a correct decision to be made and if someone has legitimate epistemic authority to make claims about what the correct decision is, the epistemic case for democracy crumbles."[30]

Other critics have framed this as an *epistemological problem* for epistemic theories of democracy.[31] The basic puzzle is: how can we know whether a procedure is likely to perform well according to some standard without having independent access to that standard? If the legitimacy of democracy hinges on its epistemic performance, there must be an authority competent to evaluate these outcomes. However, in a diverse and pluralistic society, achieving consensus on who qualifies as a legitimate epistemic authority on political matters is an elusive goal. There is no undisputed, publicly justifiable criterion for identifying expertise, nor is there widespread agreement on which political decisions are the "right" ones.[32] Without access to such standards, we are left with no choice but to rely on the very democratic decisions whose epistemic merits we seek to ascertain.

This epistemological challenge is perhaps the most common objection to epistemic theories of democracy.[33] In response to it, one might insist there *are* procedure independent standards *and* that we sometimes have access to them. In other words, the epistemic circumstances of politics are not always characterized by intractable

28. Cf. Kelsen 1955: 2; Valentini 2012: 191; Waldron 1999: 252–4.
29. Peter 2016: 134.
30. Peter 2016: 134.
31. Gaus 2011; Ingham 2013; Muirhead 2014; Rorty 2000.
32. Dahl 1989; Estlund 2008; Rawls 1993; Waldron 1999.
33. Gerlsbeck 2018: 223.

reasonable disagreement. Peter takes this line in her new book. She argues that legitimate political decisions are those made by individuals with "cognitive authority" in situations where this authority is not "epistemically underdetermined."[34]

The problem with this approach, however, is that it leads us back into the authority dilemma: the more likely it is that there are agreed upon standards, the less likely it is that democratic decisions are necessary. (Peter endorses this conclusion.) Hans Kelsen made the same observation almost 70 years ago:

> The doctrine that democracy presupposes the belief that there exists an objectively ascertainable common good and that people are able to know it and therefore to make it the content of their will is erroneous. If it were correct, democracy would not be possible.[35]

An epistemic defense of democracy therefore appears to be self-undermining. Either it presupposes favorable epistemic circumstances that are incompatible with democracy, or it presupposes *un*favorable epistemic circumstances that are incompatible with a genuinely epistemic defense of democracy.

3 Avoiding the Dilemma

To answer this challenge, there must be a way to justify democracy on the basis of its capacity to make good decisions without (a) leading us back into the authority dilemma or (b) making controversial assumptions about which decisions are the "right" ones. Is that possible? How can we be confident that a process tends to get the right answers, even if we don't know what would count as a right answer?

In this section, I will suggest several ways to resolve this predicament. To keep things simple, I'll focus on the epistemic version of the challenge, which can be summarized as follows:

> **The Epistemic Challenge for Epistemic Democracy**
>
> An epistemic justification for democracy requires showing that democratic procedures tend to yield correct decisions. However, there is widespread and persistent reasonable disagreement about which decisions are correct. The challenge is to show that democratic procedures are reliable without making any controversial assumptions about which outcomes are the "right" ones.

Is it possible to answer this challenge? Several theorists think not. Sean Ingham says, "Any convincing epistemic argument for democratic procedures would have

34. Peter 2023: 9.
35. Kelsen 1955: 2.

to presuppose answers to divisive political questions."[36] Likewise, Peter claims, "the attempt to defend democracy on epistemic instrumentalist grounds is self-undermining."[37] How might epistemic democrats respond to this challenge?

A common strategy is to point to *general features* of democratic decision-making procedures that plausibly enable us to track the truth. For example, John Stuart Mill argues that public deliberation and free speech enhance our ability to make epistemic progress. If we carefully consider contrasting viewpoints, this fosters opinions that are more soundly reasoned and buttressed by arguments.[38] On similar grounds, epistemic democrats have claimed that decisions made via democratic procedures enjoy some presumptive epistemic advantage. The public exchange of reasons can purportedly educate citizens about political issues, enlarge the pools of ideas, weed out bad arguments and factual errors, make us aware of what other people think, and increase our understanding of how political proposals may impact diverse others within society.[39] A diversity of perspectives can also help to reduce cognitive and social biases, leading to a more objective picture of the social world.[40] As a result, societies will make more informed and balanced decisions.

However, skeptics may cast doubt on this approach They might argue that we've yet to resolve the key issue: How can we truly evaluate the epistemic quality of democratic procedures without relying on controversial standards of truth and rightness? The skeptic's argument goes deeper than just questioning the effectiveness of deliberation. They might point out that any claim about the epistemic benefits of democratic processes—whether it's about the educative effects of public discourse, the advantages of diverse perspectives, or the error-correcting nature of open debate—ultimately requires some benchmark against which to measure these supposed improvements. For instance, how can we definitively conclude that deliberation leads to epistemic improvement when there are persistent concerns about public ignorance, cognitive biases, and political polarization? The skeptic will argue that to make such assessments, we would need to presuppose certain standards of correctness that are themselves the subject of reasonable disagreement. What one group sees as progress towards truth, another might view as a departure from it. In a pluralistic society, how can we establish a non-controversial basis for judging the epistemic merits of democratic outcomes?

I believe that epistemic theorists have several strategies to address this, which I'll examine below. These strategies include: (1) calibration, which involves evaluating democratic performance in less controversial areas and extrapolating to more contentious ones; (2) appealing to evidence from minipublics, which demonstrates

36. Ingham 2013: 149.
37. Peter 2016: 133.
38. Mill 1859.
39. Anderson 2006; Dewey 1927; Estlund 2008; Landemore 2012; Martí 2006; Mill 1859; Young 1997.
40. Mercier and Sperber 2017.

the epistemic benefits of structured democratic deliberation in controlled settings; and (3) improving the status quo, which focuses on assessing whether democratic decisions lead to improvements over existing conditions. Each of these approaches offers a way to defend the epistemic value of democracy without relying on controversial standards of truth or rightness, thus rebutting the skeptic's challenge.[41]

3.1 Calibration Inside Politics

Political systems can be *calibrated* by observing their decision-making performance in cases where performance is relatively uncontroversial. We can then generalize to cases where it would be too controversial to evaluate performance directly. Estlund proposes this strategy. To evaluate whether democracies make good decisions, he says we should look at whether they generally avoid "primary bads." These include evils that no reasonable point of view would deny are important to avoid, such as "war, famine, economic collapse, political collapse, epidemic, and genocide."[42] We can empirically test how well various political systems avoid these bads. If democracy does reasonably well on these issues, that is evidence that its procedures will tend to make good—which Estlund understands as better than random—decisions on more contentious issues.

One might object that these "primary bads" are not as uncontroversial as Estlund claims.[43] For example, there might be reasonable disagreement about the morality of war, given that wars are sometimes justified. As a supplementary strategy, one could also appeal to a broader range of empirical evidence suggesting that democracies are generally better places to live than non-democracies along various dimensions. This comparative approach provides indirect evidence that democracies tend to make good choices, without relying on a narrow set of potentially contestable criteria. In comparison to monarchies, oligarchies, and dictatorships, democracies tend to prevent mass famine, grant more freedoms to their citizens, and experience fewer major policy disasters. Democracies also generally avoid waging war against each other, do not engage in mass murder of their own citizens, and tend to be more prosperous and peaceful.[44]

While these facts don't prove that democracy is flawless or even the most effective system possible, they do show that we can measure its success without assumptions that violate reasonable pluralism. By demonstrating that democracies con-

41. Rawls takes a similar approach. He aspires to formulate the core commitments of liberal democracy in a way that "stays on the surface, philosophically speaking" by implicating no specific controversial moral doctrine (1985: 395). Analogously, this defense of epistemic democracy tries to "stay on the surface" by implicating no controversial assumptions about what the truth is and who has it.
42. Estlund 2008: 163.
43. Gaus 2011: 293.
44. Brennan 2016: 194-5; Doyle 1983; Halperin et al. 2010; Sen 1999: 178; Somin 2013: 9.

sistently outperform other forms of government across various outcomes, we can argue for the epistemic merits of democratic decision-making, even with disagreements about specific political issues or the exact definition of good governance.

3.2 Calibration Outside Politics

Instead of focusing exclusively on moral and political judgments, we can also start with non-political cases where the answers are obvious or uncontentious. By doing so, we can establish the epistemic reliability of specific procedures in a particular domain and then extrapolate those findings to areas characterized by reasonable disagreement about the best outcomes. The fundamental characteristics that allow participants to discern the truth in one domain should, in principle, be applicable to issues where the standard of correctness is more contentious. This approach enables us to identify and validate the epistemic virtues of certain decision-making processes, even when the subject matter itself is open to debate.

To illustrate the potential of this approach, consider the findings presented by Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber in their book, *The Enigma of Reason*. They provide compelling evidence that people are more reliable when they reason together. They support this claim with a wealth of experimental studies, but their most striking example is the Wason four-card selection task, a logical puzzle designed to test conditional reasoning. In this task, participants are presented with four cards, each displaying a letter or number on one side. They are then asked to test the validity of a rule, such as "If a card has a vowel on one side, then it has an even number on the other side." Although individual performance on this task is typically poor, with only around 15% of participants answering correctly, group discussions dramatically enhance the success rate, with up to 80% of participants arriving at the correct solution. Mercier and Sperber emphasize that "When argumentation is not involved, group performance is disappointing," underlining the critical role of deliberation in enhancing epistemic reliability.

This lends support to deliberative conceptions of democracy, which emphasize the importance of inclusive, reasoned discussion in collective decision-making. The Wason task is just one of many examples demonstrating that, in various contexts, inclusive deliberation tends to increase the chances that a group figures out the right answer to a given problem. Thus, we can assume that a political system that prioritizes widespread, substantive deliberation among its citizens is more likely to arrive at better-informed and epistemically sound decisions.

3.3 External Validity

Admittedly, this type of calibration raises concerns about external validity. It is reasonable to question whether procedures that consistently lead to truth in one domain can be reliably extended to other contexts, particularly the complex and

contentious realm of politics. This challenge is undoubtedly significant. In order to infer that democratic procedures are reliable, we must assume that the epistemic properties of procedures within one domain (where standards of correctness are clear) could be indicative of their epistemic value in another domain (where standards of correctness are controversial). That assumption can be challenged.[45] However, it does not necessarily imply that epistemic theories of democracy are "self-undermining" or conceptually incoherent. Instead, it serves as a cautionary reminder to approach the theorizing of how political systems contribute to good outcomes with prudence and humility. As Michael Bennett observes, "We will need to proceed carefully in asking what causal factors lie behind the observed patterns of decision-making quality in our different sources, and whether these same causes are likely to apply in the different contexts of high-stakes politics."[46] By acknowledging the limitations and potential pitfalls of cross-domain comparisons, we can engage in a more nuanced and reflective analysis of the epistemic merits of democratic procedures.

3.4 Minipublics

The epistemic merits of democratic deliberation have also been extensively studied in the context of minipublics.[47] Minipublics are relatively small, diverse, randomly selected panels of citizens brought together to discuss policy matters. These groups are designed to be representative of the larger population and to foster informed, reasoned discussion among participants.

Research on minipublics has consistently shown that when citizens are given the opportunity to deliberate in a structured setting with the help of a moderator, they become better informed about the issues at hand. Participants in minipublics often gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of policy problems, and they are exposed to a wider range of perspectives and arguments. This exposure can lead to more nuanced and well-reasoned opinions, as well as greater appreciation of the validity of differing viewpoints.[48]

One of the strengths of the research on minipublics is that it does not rely on assumptions about what the "correct" policy outcomes are. Instead, researchers use pre- and post-deliberation surveys to measure participants' knowledge of the policy issues discussed. These surveys focus on factual information rather than normative judgments, with the presumption that as people become more informed, their views are more likely to track the truth.[49] In addition to measuring knowledge gains, researchers also assess participants' understanding of diverse perspec-

45. Ingham 2012: 148-9.
46. Bennett 2022: 21.
47. Fishkin 2011; 2018; Niemeyer and Dryzek 2007.
48. Fishkin 2009; Grönlund et al. 2014.
49. Fishkin 2018.

tives by asking them to describe arguments for and against the policy in question both before and after deliberation. This allows researchers to track how exposure to different viewpoints can broaden participants' understanding of the issue.[50]

Researchers also measure the degree of opinion convergence among minipublic participants. While convergence alone does not necessarily indicate epistemic success, it can be a sign that participants are considering and integrating diverse perspectives in a way that leads to more robust and well-justified conclusions.[51] Another approach to evaluating the epistemic quality of minipublic deliberations is through argument mapping. This involves analyzing the structure and coherence of the arguments made by participants, as well as their use of evidence and reasoning.[52] By assessing the quality of the deliberative process itself, researchers can gain insight into the epistemic value of its outcomes.

In response, critics argue that the findings from minipublic experiments, while interesting, tell us little about the epistemic merits of actual democracies. They contend that these structured, moderated discussions among small groups of citizens bear little resemblance to the messy, often polarized nature of political deliberation in real democratic societies. Moreover, the infrequent and isolated nature of these deliberative experiments means they fail to capture the persistent challenges faced by real-world democracies, such as entrenched power structures, media influence, and the complexities of long-term governance. In addition, skeptics may question the scalability of these experiments, arguing that what works for a group of 100 or 1,000 citizens cannot be meaningfully extrapolated to nations of millions. They point out that while minipublics have demonstrated citizens' capacity to deliberate knowledgeably about public policy issues, their temporary nature and lack of real political influence severely limit their impact on the overall decision-making quality of democracy.

I have two replies to these important concerns. First, while it's true that minipublic experiments don't perfectly mirror the complexities of large-scale democratic deliberation, they still offer valuable insights that can inform and improve our democratic practices. Indeed, the epistemic success of minipublics suggests that we should establish them as a permanent and more powerful component of a deliberative democratic system. In this vein, proposals have been made to utilize sortition in a bi-cameral legislature where one chamber would be elected and the other would be selected by random lottery.[53] Alternatively, Alexander Guerrero's "lottocracy" system envisions replacing elected legislatures with randomly selected citizen assemblies.[54] Along similar lines, Landemore's "open democracy" model

50. Dryzek et al. 2019.
51. Niemeyer and Dryzek 2007.
52. Bächtiger and Parkinson 2019.
53. Gastil and Wright 2019.
54. Guerrero 2014.

emphasizes the need for more inclusive and deliberative democratic institutions, with a large "open minipublic" at the center of a web of other mini-publics.[55]

Second, even if the current research on minipublics does not give us adequate reason to regard real democracies as living up to their epistemic potential, they nevertheless show how it is *in principle* possible to design epistemically reliable procedures without presupposing any narrow, controversial view of which outcomes are the correct ones. Put differently, research on minipublics demonstrates of how to measure the epistemic merits of specific democratic procedures, thereby addressing the fundamental conceptual challenge outlined in §2. Thus, the empirical evidence from minipublics provides a compelling proof of concept for the epistemic potential of democratic deliberation. As researchers continue to study minipublics and other deliberative forums, they can help identify the specific institutional design features and discursive norms that are most conducive to epistemic success.[56]

3.5 Improving the Status Quo

Another strategy is to evaluate whether a particular decision is an *improvement* over the status quo, rather than focusing on identifying the all-things-considered best solution.[57] This approach turns the perspective around. Instead of asking, "Is this the right outcome?" we can ask, "Did we get out of a specific bad state?" This strategy can be effective in situations where there is broad agreement about the existence of a problem but disagreement about the optimal solution.

Felix Gerlsbeck illustrates this point with the following example:

> Assume there is widespread unhappiness about sluggish economic growth, and deep disagreement about what should be done about it. Let's further assume that a fiscal stimulus package and tax cuts would both accelerate growth compared to the status quo, but they will not do so equally well. Now, it would a tall order for a political procedure to have to find out which one of those two proposals is better. But given that the problem in this situation is slow economic growth, which means that some people's demands are unnecessarily unmet, what matters first and foremost is that a procedure efficiently implements either solution, thus improving things relative to the problematic status quo, while allowing future review and revision.[58]

As Gerlsbeck argues, this approach can be applied to a wide range of issues, such as famine, poverty, high unemployment, homelessness, and violent crime. In many

55. Landemore 2020: 13.
56. Bächtiger et al. 2018.
57. Gerlsbeck 2018.
58. Gerlsbeck 2018: 226-7.

cases, it may be unclear which solution will be the most effective, and sometimes there may be uncertainty about the effectiveness of any proposed solution in a specific context. Nevertheless, we can sometimes agree there has been a context-specific improvement, even if the "losing" side will maintain that their proposal would have yielded far better results.

The distinction between "weak" and "strong" political cognitivism, outlined by Hélène Landemore, is relevant here. Weak political cognitivism defines the standard of correctness in terms of the *avoidance of major harms or mistakes*, while strong political cognitivism defines it more assertively in terms of *tracking the truth*.[59] This distinction suggests two possible approaches to building the epistemic case for democracy. The first, more ambitious approach is to claim that democracy is epistemically valuable in terms of maximizing truth. The second, more modest approach is to argue that democracy is epistemically valuable in terms of reducing error or avoiding disaster. There is a clear asymmetry in the epistemic burden associated with these two approaches. For example, it is much harder to determine which healthcare system best promotes the common good than to recognize that a system leaving most people without access to a doctor and significantly lowering life expectancy is bad.[60]

Although epistemic democracy is standardly interpreted as aiming at truth, some of its leading proponents have explicitly argued that weak political cognitivism offers a plausible notion of "truth" in politics.[61] They favor this weaker approach because it is less contentious: it is generally easier to identify what should be avoided than to determine the optimal course of action. Furthermore, this weaker stance can still provide a strong epistemic foundation for democracy. By emphasizing the ability of democratic processes to steer society away from clearly problematic states, rather than their ability to consistently identify the best possible outcomes, we can develop a more robust and defensible epistemic justification for democracy.

3.6 Interim Summary

To summarize the discussion so far, I have explored a central challenge for epistemic theories of democracy: the need to demonstrate that democratic procedures tend to yield good decisions without presupposing which outcomes are "correct." I have suggested several complementary strategies for addressing this conceptual puzzle, including calibrating democratic procedures using uncontroversial cases, extrapolating from non-political domains where epistemic reliability can be more easily established, and drawing on empirical research on minipublics. These approaches aim to show that it is possible, in principle, to epistemically assess democ-

59. Landemore 2012: 211-213.
60. Benson 2024: 188.
61. Estlund 2008; Landemore 2012.

racy without relying on contentious standards of correctness.[62]

However, even if this conceptual challenge can be addressed, epistemic theories face another significant obstacle: they must demonstrate that real-world democracies are, in fact, epistemically successful. This brings us to the second major challenge confronting these theories. If democracy lacks its purported epistemic advantages, then a commitment to epistemic instrumentalism would compel us to abandon democracy. In this way, epistemic theories of democracy may contain the seeds of their own potential demise. They render the justification of democracy contingent upon its epistemic performance relative to other systems of government. This worry occupies the next section.

4 Should We Bet Democracy on Epistemology?

As discussed above, epistemic democrats tie the legitimacy of political institutions and procedures to the quality of their outcomes. Thus, a political system that consistently yields poor decisions lacks legitimacy. For this reason, Cristina Lafont notes that epistemic democracy is *essentially* committed to epistocracy and only *contingently* committed to democracy.[63] If democracy were shown not to be an epistemically effective system, and, for example, a benevolent dictator could achieve better results, then epistemic considerations would lead us to abandon democracy for epistocracy.

By tying the legitimacy of democracy to its outcomes, epistemic democrats are essentially taking a gamble that can be stated as follows:

> **The Epistemic Gamble**
>
> By introducing an epistemic dimension into politics, we risk jeopardizing rather than supporting the case for democracy. The epistemic competence of democracy is highly contested, given concerns about public ignorance, cognitive bias, and misinformation. When proponents of epistemic democracy assert that the legitimacy of democracy hinges on its epistemic competence, they wager the case for democracy on its presumed epistemic reliability.

This raises the question: should we take this bet? Is it not reckless to base the

62. This falsifies Rorty's argument against truth as the aim of inquiry. He claims, "you cannot aim at something, cannot work to get it, unless you can recognize it once you have got it… We shall never know for sure whether a given belief is true… So I think the topic of truth cannot be made relevant to democratic politics" (Rorty 2000: 2). Contra Rorty, I argued above that democratic procedures can aim at the truth without being able to recognize when they have it.
63. Lafont 2020: 77.

legitimacy of democracy on precarious epistemic grounds?[64]

Many theorists are reluctant to justify democracy on epistemic grounds precisely to avoid the risk of having to abandon it in the face of contradictory evidence.[65] They argue that basing the legitimacy of democracy on its presumed epistemic competence is a risky gambit that could ultimately erode the very foundations of democratic governance.[66] This concern has been foregrounded by epistemic theorists themselves. Estlund warns, "The biggest objection to bringing in the epistemic dimension is that it might to tend to justify rule by the knowers—what we might call epistocracy."[67] Similarly, José Luis Martí states, "One of the main fears about the epistemic conception of democracy in general is that it can lead us to elitist views."[68]

To safeguard democracy, epistemic theorists might fall back on the more modest position that epistemic factors are not the sole determinants of political legitimacy. According to this view, the tendency to yield correct decisions may provide a strong reason to prefer democracy over alternative forms of government, but it need not be the only or even the primary justification. As Robert Goodin and Kai Spiekermann assert, "That they have considerable epistemic virtues is not the only, and maybe not even the principal, thing to be said in favor of democratic procedures. Still, that is definitely a major good-making feature of democracy."[69] From this perspective, even if authoritarianism were shown to be more epistemically competent, we would not be forced to abandon democracy, as its legitimacy would rest on a combination of epistemic and non-epistemic factors.[70]

However, this weaker form of epistemic democracy remains susceptible to the "epistemic gamble" concern. While epistemic success might not be the sole or primary factor in favor of democracy, epistemic democrats still consider it a *neces-*

64. It is worth noting that epistemic democrats rely on another controversial assumption: they presume the existence of normative political truths. This is also a form of gamble, albeit a metaphysical rather than an epistemological one. If such truths do not exist in the political realm, political legitimacy could not be grounded in any such facts. However, I will set this concern aside. I find it plausible that there are at least some political truths, in the sense that certain political choices can be made well or poorly. Denying this would imply that there are no better or worse decisions in politics, or that there are no truths about what society ought to do—a position that seems difficult to defend.
65. Saffon and Urbinati 2013; Urbinati 2014; Hill 2016; Invernizzi-Accetti 2017.
66. Interestingly, Landemore (2014: 196) maintains that appealing to epistemic considerations may *block* the specter of epistocracy. She writes, "while epistemic democrats are always suspected of opening the door to the rule of experts, their arguments might actually provide a way to close that door for good: by establishing that democracies and their procedures are, all things considered, a better epistemic bet than expertocracies."
67. Estlund 2008: 7.
68. Martí 2006.
69. Goodin and Spiekermann 2018: 312.
70. Estlund 2008.

sary condition for legitimacy. A political system that consistently makes poor decisions would, therefore, lack legitimacy. Estlund, for instance, argues that democracy would have no normative authority—no right to demand obedience to its decisions—if it failed to meet a minimal epistemic standard, which he defines as "better than random."[71] Similarly, Goodin and Spiekermann contend that "incompetence" would erode democratic legitimacy.[72] Consequently, introducing *any* epistemic element into the justification for democracy, even as a non-decisive factor, still exposes it to the risks associated with the epistemic gamble.

To further mitigate risk, one might weaken the epistemic claim even more. Specifically, one could propose that truth-tracking is merely a "good-making" feature of democracy, rather than a necessary condition for its legitimacy. However, this view would not qualify as a genuinely *epistemic* defense of democracy, as it rejects the normative thesis that democratic procedures must have epistemic value to be justified. Instead, proponents of this view would have to root democracy's legitimacy in non-epistemic principles like equality, participation, and freedom.

Finally, epistemic theorists might retreat to the following conditional claim: *if* democracy is epistemically competent, then epistemic considerations will justify it; but if it's *not*, then we must justify democracy on non-epistemic grounds. (We might call this strategy "hedging your bets.") However, this strategy appears *ad hoc* and normatively arbitrary. If a non-epistemic basis for democratic legitimacy exists, there would be no need to justify democracy on epistemic grounds in the first place. Furthermore, this strategy presents a dilemma for the epistemic theorist. If one is willing to abandon the epistemic justification of democracy upon empirical refutation, then competence is not necessary for political legitimacy, as there is already a non-epistemic basis for democratic legitimacy. Therefore, the epistemic justification becomes superfluous.

In summary, even weaker forms of epistemic democracy, which do not treat epistemic considerations as decisive, still raise concerns about epistemic risk. Democracy may not prove to be particularly impressive from an epistemic standpoint. Thus, linking democracy's legitimacy to its epistemic performance may undermine the very foundations of democratic governance. For this reason, many theorists reject epistemic theories of democracy.

In the next section, I will argue that this criticism is fallacious for several reasons. First, it misunderstands the instrumental nature of epistemic defenses of democracy. Second, it ignores the principled reasons for considering epistemic competence as a crucial component of political legitimacy. Third, it overlooks the fact that a theory should not be rejected merely because it challenges our preconceptions or leads to counterintuitive results.

71. Estlund 2008: 98.
72. Goodin and Spiekermann 2018: 309.

5 Abandon Democracy—So What?

The argument in the previous section can be summarized as follows:

> **The "Risky Bet" Argument**
>
> 1. Epistemic theories might not favor democracy.
>
> 2. Therefore, we shouldn't attempt to justify democracy on epistemic grounds.

As discussed in §4, this critique is commonly leveled against epistemic defenses of democracy. However, this argument is problematic for at least three reasons.

First, the criticism that epistemic theories might lead to the abandonment of democracy is a non-starter because it merely highlights the logical implications of the instrumental approach to democracy, which is endorsed by all epistemic democrats.[73] As instrumentalist, epistemic democrats are willing to defend democracy to the extent that it produces desirable outcomes. They view democracy as a means to an end, valuable not intrinsically but for the results it yields. Openness to the possibility of non-democratic decision-making processes, provided they can generate better political outcomes, is precisely what it means to be an instrumentalist about democracy. Therefore, the potential for epistemic considerations to justify non-democratic arrangements is not a weakness of epistemic theories, but rather a consistent application of their underlying principles.

Moreover, it is misleading to characterize this approach as placing a "risky bet." Epistemic democrats are not gambling blindly. They are willing to consider non-democratic alternatives only when those alternatives demonstrably outperform democracy in making good political decisions. This is not the picture painted by critics, who envision a false dichotomy between democracy and oppressive regimes like totalitarian dictatorships, which have historically made poor political decisions. This oversimplifies the range of potential alternatives. As Jonathan Benson points out, there exists a diverse spectrum of nondemocratic institutions that epistemic theorists might consider, including free markets, polycentric governance systems, and political meritocracy.[74] These alternatives extend far beyond traditional rivals such as autocracy and oligarchy. In essence, the epistemic approach is not a gamble but a commitment to pursuing the most effective decision-making arrangements for society's benefit. If democracy's epistemic competence were to be refuted, it would simply provide a reasoned basis for exploring *better* alternative arrangements, always with the goal of making wise decisions that benefit society as a whole.

73. Ziliotti 2019: 421.
74. Benson 2024: 11.

Second, the "risky bet" argument ignores the principled reasons that epistemic theorists have given for considering a political system's ability to make good decisions as a crucial component of its legitimacy. To dismiss epistemic theories simply because they *might* entail non-democratic arrangements is to overlook the substantive arguments for why good decision-making is an essential aspect of any legitimate political system. As Benson aptly notes, "Political decisions affect our ability to put food on the table, educate our children, care for the sick, protect the natural environment, and pursue our life plans. It is therefore only to be expected that many people will wish to have a form of government which can take these decisions in an informed and considered fashion." For this reason, democrats cannot and should not simply wave aside epistemic theories. While some may fear that considering epistemic values opens the door to nondemocratic forms of rule, the greater threat may lie in dismissing the importance of making good political decisions without directly addressing the relevant arguments.

A more fruitful way for advocates of democracy to engage with instrumentalists would be to challenge them to articulate why achieving certain political outcomes is more important than realizing certain political conditions that can only be expressed through democratic processes. In this vein, critics should press epistemic democrats to clarify why securing good epistemic outcomes is theoretically more significant than, say, ensuring liberty, equality, and self-determination. These are key questions central to the debate between instrumental and non-instrumental theories of democracy, and they provide a promising starting point for a substantive and illuminating exchange between these two camps.[75]

Third, a theory is not incorrect simply because it leads to conclusions that challenge the status quo. If there are strong arguments for the claim that political legitimacy requires an epistemic dimension, then we must engage with those arguments on their merits, even if they lead to conclusions that challenge our deeply held beliefs. We cannot reject these theories simply because they make us uncomfortable or because they suggest that our current political practices may be inadequate. Instead, we must carefully examine the premises and logic of these arguments and see where they lead us. If we find that the epistemic case for political legitimacy is sound, then we must be willing to follow the implications of that conclusion, even if it means rethinking our commitment to democracy as it currently exists.

To illustrate this point, we can look at other areas of philosophy where theories are not dismissed merely because they lead to counterintuitive conclusions. Take Peter Singer's famous argument in his essay "Famine, Affluence, and Morality."[76] In this work, Singer argues that if we can prevent something bad from happening without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we are morally

75. For a similar suggestion, see Ziliotti 2019: 421.
76. Singer 1972.

required to do so. This principle leads to the radical conclusion that relatively affluent individuals are morally required to donate a significant portion of their wealth to alleviate suffering and prevent death due to poverty-related causes.

For many people, Singer's conclusion is deeply unsettling. It challenges our familiar notions of moral obligation and charity, and it implies that most of us are living in a state of constant moral failure, as we prioritize our own desires and conveniences over the urgent needs of others. However, the fact that Singer's conclusion is counterintuitive is not a valid reason to reject his argument. If his premises are plausible and his logic is valid, then we are forced to grapple with the implications of his argument, no matter how difficult or unsettling they may be. We cannot simply dismiss his argument because we don't like where it leads us.

Consider another example: libertarianism about free will. This view holds that to justify moral responsibility, human actions must not be determined by prior causes or external factors. However, whether human actions are indeed free from such determinism is highly contentious. If it turns out that human actions are deterministic, then we would need to abandon or significantly revise our deepest assumptions about moral responsibility. The question arises: should we reject libertarianism about free will to avoid this problematic implication? I submit that we should not. The mere fact that a conclusion calls for a revision of our practices is not a sufficient reason to reject the thesis that led to it. Instead, the appropriate response is to critically examine the reasons for accepting the link between libertarian free will and moral responsibility, and challenge those if necessary.

The same is true of epistemic theories of democracy. If these theories are based on sound arguments and plausible premises, then we cannot dismiss them simply because they lead to conclusions that challenge the status quo. Instead, we must engage with the arguments on their merits and follow the logic where it leads.

Landemore echoes this sentiment. She argues that our discomfort with the potential consequences of an argument should not deter us from engaging with it seriously:

> [The epistemic theory] makes proceduralist/intrinsic democrats uncomfortable because they think that if epistemic democrats are wrong, then our commitment to democracy will collapse. First of all, I am tempted to answer: So what? Since when should we as political theorists be tied only to propositions that happen to support our current prejudices? The proceduralist fear sounds like a very unscientific endorsement of motivated reasoning.[77]

In a later article, Landemore emphasizes the same point:

77. Landemore 2014, 195.

> The first thing to remark is that *fear of the consequences of an argument does not amount to a good case against it.* As political theorists, we should not shy away from inquiries just because they may question the foundations of our most cherished beliefs. This is especially true since pursuing epistemic explorations may well force us to produce better reasons for democracy and help us put it on a more secure footing than we currently have.[78]

Landemore makes two important points here. First, if the epistemic case for democracy is sound, then we should be prepared to follow the logic wherever it leads, even if it challenges our deeply held beliefs about the intrinsic value of democracy. Second, far from undermining democracy, grappling with epistemic arguments can ultimately strengthen the case for it. By forcing us to confront difficult questions and develop more robust justifications, this process can lead to a richer understanding of democracy's value. Avoiding these arguments out of fear is not only intellectually cowardly but also a missed opportunity to deepen our commitment to democratic principles.

This is not to say that we should abandon democracy at the first sign of trouble or that we should constantly be searching for something better. As argued in section 3.1, democracy has proven to be a remarkably resilient and adaptable system, and it has brought immense benefits to countless people around the world. However, it would be a mistake to treat it as an unassailable or immutable ideal. It is important to recognize that democracy, for all its merits, may simply be the best form of government we have devised thus far. Just as political systems have evolved and progressed throughout history, we should remain open to the prospect of discovering or developing more effective alternatives.

I will conclude by suggesting a better strategy for critiquing epistemic theories of democracy. The case against epistemic democracy shouldn't rest on showing that democracy is epistemically incompetent (i.e., that the descriptive claim is false), nor should it rest on our uneasiness about the contingency of democracy. Instead, the strongest argument for protecting democracy from epistemology would *grant*, for the sake of argument, the epistemic superiority of democracy. Then, it would show why this view still leaves out something essential. This way, we can demonstrate that epistemic theories are missing something valuable *even if we assume that democracy is the epistemically best system.* In short, we should attack the normative thesis on its own terms, not simply dismiss it because it might lead to conclusions that we don't like. The best way to defend democracy against epistemic challenges is not to avoid them, but to confront them directly and demonstrate that democracy has value that goes beyond its epistemic merits.

78. Landemore 2017: 288, emphasis mine.

6 Conclusion

I have considered two prominent challenges to epistemic theories of democracy: "the authority dilemma" and "the epistemic gamble." These arguments contend that grounding democracy's legitimacy in its epistemic qualities is either conceptually incoherent or practically risky. However, I have argued that these challenges are ultimately unpersuasive. The self-undermining argument rests on the assumption that epistemic democracy requires access to an independent, uncontroversial standard of correctness. As I have shown, there are ways to calibrate and assess the epistemic performance of democracy without making controversial assumptions that violate reasonable pluralism. The risky bet argument, on the other hand, relies on a misguided reluctance to engage with arguments that challenge our preconceptions about democracy. It rejects epistemic theories not because they are false, but because they may lead to uncomfortable conclusions. This is not a valid reason to dismiss these theories.

Of course, none of this is to say that the epistemic case for democracy is airtight or that epistemic considerations should be the only factor in justifying political systems. Epistemic democrats may still need to grapple with the existence of reasonable disagreement, the problem of public ignorance, and the role of non-epistemic values in politics. But what this article has shown is that two of the most common arguments against epistemic democracy are not as powerful as they may first appear.

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