Political Epistemology: An Introduction

Michael Hannon & Elise Woodard

A note to readers:

This is a preview of the full text, featuring the opening pages of each chapter, as well as the full introduction. The book will be published by Routledge in May 2025.

The story of the conflict between truth and politics is an old and complicated one.

— Hannah Arendt

Contents

Introduction 1

1 Truth & Politics 18

2 Epistemic Democracy 40

3 Epistemic Democracy Reconsidered 66

4 Political Ignorance 91

5 Irrationality & Bias 119

6 Political Belief 141

7 Political Disagreement 160

8 Polarization & Partisanship 184

9 Trust & Expertise 213

10 Rethinking Democracy 243

Bibliography 279

In memory of Derek Hannon

Acknowledgments

We have been fortunate to have many generous interlocutors who sparked new ideas, challenged our thinking, and supported us through various stages of this project. These individuals include Alex Guerrero, Alex Worsnip, Al Prescott-Couch, Ben Caldecott, Ben Tappin, Carolina Flores, Dan Williams, David Estlund, David O'Brien, Dennis Whitcomb, Elizabeth Edenberg, Eric Beerbohm, Fabienne Peter, Gareth Nellis, Hélène Landemore, Ilya Somin, Jeffrey Friedman, Jeroen de Ridder, Jess Kwong, Josh DiPaolo, Kate Elgin, Kevin Roberts, Kristoffer Ahlstrom-Vij, Louise Hanson, Max Hayward, Michael Lynch, Neil Levy, Nick Hughes, Rishi Joshi, Robert Talisse, Robin McKenna, and Thi Nguyen. We are especially grateful to Adam Gibbons and Sean Ingham for their invaluable and detailed feedback on the entire manuscript. Our thanks also go to three anonymous referees, whose thoughtful comments significantly improved the final work.

Audiences at the following events have also provided helpful feedback at various stages of writing: the Knowledge in Crisis Project at CEU in Vienna; the Episteme Workshop in Rhodes; the PPE Society Meetings in New Orleans; the European Face of Political Epistemology conference in Croatia; the Centre for the Study of Governance and Society and the Dickson Poon School of Law at King's College London; the Bled Epistemology Conference; the Political Epistemology Network at the Eastern APA; and events at the University of Connecticut, Harvard University, University of Michigan, Tulane University, University of Warwick, and the Institute of Philosophy in London.

With kind permission, we have drawn on previously published work throughout this book. Chapter 1 borrows from "The Politics of Post-Truth," *Critical Review: A Journal of Politics and Society* 35 (1): 40-62, 2023. Chapter 3 incorporates material from "Betting Democracy on Epistemology," forthcoming in *Episteme*. Chapter 5 includes content from "Are Knowledgeable Voters Better Voters?" *Politics, Philosophy and Economics* 21 (1): 29-54. 2022. Chapter 6 is partly based on a co-authored chapter with Jeroen de Ridder, "The Point of Political Belief," in *The Routledge Handbook of Political Epistemology*, edited by Michael Hannon and Jeroen de Ridder, Routledge, 2021. Chapter 7 draws on "Disagreement and Contemporary Political Philosophy," in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Disagreement*, edited by Maria Baghramian, J. Adam Carter, and Rach Cosker-Rowland, Routledge, 2025. Chapter 9 includes material from

"Public Discourse and Its Problems," *Politics, Philosophy and Economics* 22 (3): 336-356, 2023. We thank the relevant editors and publishers for letting us draw on these works.

Michael Hannon is deeply grateful to the Edmond and Lily Safra Center for Ethics at Harvard University, where he spent a wonderful and productive year as a Fellow-in-Residence (2022–3) working on this book and related projects. Special thanks go to Eric Beerbohm, his fellowship mentor, and Danielle Allen, the Center's Director, as well as to the many visiting fellows whose insights enriched his work. He is also incredibly grateful to the Murphy Institute and the Center for Ethics and Public Affairs at Tulane University, where he first began writing this book as a Faculty Fellow (2021–2). Further, he is appreciative of the University of Nottingham for allowing him to develop and teach a new module, "Knowledge, Ignorance, and Democracy," which inspired much of this book.

Michael would also like to thank the Institute for Humane Studies for a Discourse Initiative Award that funded research into insincere political discourse. In addition, he'd like to express thanks to Jeroen de Ridder, who welcomed Michael as a Visiting Researcher (2018–21) at VU Amsterdam on the NWO Vidi project, "Knowledgeable Democracy: A Social-Epistemological Inquiry." Collaborating with Jeroen over those three years inspired many of the ideas in this book. Finally, Michael is especially thankful to Elise Woodard for her love, kindness, and support, as well as for making this book much better than it would have been without her.

Elise Woodard is thankful to MIT for supporting her research as a postdoctoral fellow from 2022 to 2023, and to the University of Michigan for providing resources that enabled her to explore and organize events on political epistemology. She also thanks the Institute of Philosophy for generously sponsoring her work as a Collaborative Research Fellow in the summer of 2023, and the Dickson Poon School of Law at King's College London for the intellectual and institutional support that enriched her teaching, writing, and scholarship in political epistemology. Finally, she would like to thank the students in her 2023 MIT graduate seminar in applied epistemology for their engaging discussions on many themes from this book, and to her students in "Legal and Political Epistemology" at King's College London, whose stimulating conversations inspired new perspectives on these topics. She'd also like to thank Michael Hannon for being a loving, supportive, and patient partner and co-author, and for letting her make this book better than it would have been without her.

We would also like to thank Barry Smith and everyone at the Institute of Philosophy for their invaluable support in bringing this project to completion, as well as for providing us with an enriching and collaborative workspace in London. It has been a joy and a privilege to work in such an inspiring environment. We are also grateful to our Editor, Tony Bruce, for encouraging us to write this book, and to Adam Johnson at Routledge for his guidance and patience throughout the process.

Our deepest gratitude goes to our families for their unwavering support. Heartfelt

thanks to the Hannons—Derek, Linda, Matt, and Jeff—and to the Woodards—Leslie, Jim, and James—for encouraging us and putting up with us. We dedicate this book to the memory of Derek Hannon, a man who had little patience for politicians and their refusal to give a straight answer.

Introduction

In 2017, a lead article in the *New Scientist* declared, "Philosophers of knowledge, your time has come."[1] The piece insists that epistemology has "never been more important." Despite this, the term "epistemology" remained obscure to many, even among the well-educated. A common response to its mention was a puzzled "episte. . . what?!"

Since then, terms like "epistemic" and "epistemological" have infiltrated the public lexicon. Prominent figures such as Barack Obama and *New York Times* columnist David Brooks have warned of an "epistemological crisis," while outlets such as *Vox* have reported "a deep epistemic breach."[2] This crisis has several alleged sources and culprits. Fake news, propaganda, and conspiracy theories have blurred the lines between truth and falsehood, reality and distortion. Our political divisions now reach beyond differences in values to fundamental questions of whom to trust, what to believe, and how to seek knowledge. Trust in media, science, and politicians is plummeting across many sectors of society, coinciding with a rise in populist sentiments. Polarization and echo chambers have deepened political divides and exacerbated closed-mindedness and dogmatism among citizens. Many of us now see others—typically our political opponents—as "detached from reality."[3]

This epistemological crisis is fundamentally political. Without a shared sense of reality and mutual trust, democracies struggle to function. If partisan adversaries inhabit different worlds, how can they cooperate to address pressing social and economic problems? As Obama warns, "If we do not have the capacity to distinguish what's true from what's false, then by definition the marketplace of ideas doesn't work. And by definition our democracy doesn't work."[4]

Donald Trump and other politicians have been accused of accelerating and amplifying, if not instigating, this epistemological crisis. Critics charge them with sowing distrust in mainstream institutions and fostering indifference towards truth.[5] However, epistemological issues in politics have a long and complex history, even if the

1. New Scientist 2017.
2. Brooks 2020; Nyce 2020; Roberts 2017.
3. Brooks 2020.
4. Nyce 2020.
5. Roberts 2017.

term "epistemic" only began to permeate public discourse with the emergence of Trump and Brexit. Political concerns about the role of truth, trust in experts, public ignorance, and other issues at the intersection of politics and epistemology can be traced back to at least the time of Plato.

In the *Republic,* Plato worried that the masses are too uninformed to be entrusted with power. He advocated for rule by the wise "philosopher kings." In *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill touted the epistemic benefits of deliberation for citizens, foreshadowing the development of deliberative conceptions of democracy. In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville highlighted the tension between democratic commitments and deference to experts. Today, skepticism about expertise and political truth is often linked to specific political groups, but scholars like Michel Foucault, John Rawls, and Hannah Arendt have posed significant philosophical and political challenges to the role of truth and experts in politics. For example, in *Political Liberalism*, John Rawls centered the issue of deep and persistent disagreement, arguing that cooperation requires setting aside debates about the truth of specific moral or philosophical doctrines. Instead, he suggested adopting an agnostic epistemological position, where citizens and officials avoid grounding political arguments in contested beliefs about ultimate truth, focusing instead on principles all can reasonably endorse.

Following Rawls, political philosophers have debated the roles that truth, justification, and the epistemic quality of decisions should play in establishing the legitimacy of democracy and other political systems. But while scholars have been interested in topics at the intersection of political philosophy and epistemology since at least Plato, recent years have witnessed an outpouring of new research in this area. For example, new work has been published on propaganda, fake news, political disagreement, conspiracy theories, voter ignorance, climate change skepticism, the epistemic harms of echo chambers, intellectual vices in politics, as well as the epistemic merits and defects of democracy.

Epistemology now appears more politically relevant than ever before. Modern developments, including the rise of the internet and social media, have given epistemological concerns in politics a distinctive shape and urgency. Our political discourse is now saturated with epistemic notions like "fake news," "post-truth," "epistemic bubbles," "truth decay," and "alternative facts." The prominence of epistemology in the public eye coincides, not coincidentally, with the development of new work in the field now branded *political epistemology*.

But what exactly is political epistemology? If political epistemology has old roots, why has it only recently become a field of study in its own right?

What is Political Epistemology?

Political epistemology is, broadly speaking, the area of philosophy at the intersection of political philosophy and epistemology. However, this definition is both uninformative and overly narrow. In reality, political epistemology is a rich, interdisciplinary field that attracts scholars from a range of disciplines, including political theory, political science, psychology, critical theory, and media studies, among others. What unites these diverse perspectives is a common focus on how epistemological issues shape our political lives and, conversely, how political forces influence our understanding of knowledge and truth.

We find it helpful to conceptualize political epistemology in two broad ways:

The Political Is Epistemological

This approach investigates how epistemological questions are central to our political lives. It emphasizes how issues of knowledge, truth, and belief shape political discourse and decision-making. For example, recent debates surrounding fake news, propaganda, post-truth, conspiracy theories, and expert distrust highlight how epistemological questions have moved to center stage in contemporary politics. These discussions reveal how political phenomena invite epistemic assessment and intervention.

The Epistemological Is Political

This perspective examines how epistemic concepts, standards, and institutions are themselves inherently political. Some theorists argue that notions of truth and knowledge reflect power relations rather than neutral, timeless standards. Foucault, for example, posits that every society has its own "regimes of truth," which establish what counts as legitimate knowledge and who has the authority to speak on certain subjects. This view highlights the ways in which our epistemic frameworks are inseparable from political and social structures.

This book focuses primarily on the first approach, examining the epistemological dimensions of political phenomena and institutions. However, we do not completely overlook the second perspective. For example, the chapters on "Truth & Politics" and "Trust & Expertise" address concerns about oppressive functions of "truth" and the social dimensions of expertise. Examining both dimensions is crucial for grasping the full scope and stakes of political epistemology, as well as the relationships between truth, politics, and knowledge.

We focus on the first project for two reasons. First, it represents the primary focus of political epistemology within analytic philosophy, which is our area of expertise. By contrast, the second approach is more thoroughly explored by authors outside the analytic tradition, such as critical theorists, in whose work we lack the requisite expertise and training. Second, any introductory text must make choices about what

to include. While some may find our focus disappointingly narrow, we invoke Mill in urging "a large tolerance for one-eyed men, provided their eye is a penetrating one: if they saw more, they probably would not see so keenly, nor so eagerly pursue one course of inquiry."[6]

In what specific ways is politics epistemological? We can identify several key areas where epistemology intersects with political theory and practice.

First, political epistemologists examine whether legitimate political authority depends, at least in part, on epistemic authority. This idea traces back to Plato, who criticized democracy for relying on the opinions of uninformed citizens. He argued that political power should instead be vested in knowledgeable experts. Relatedly, political epistemology is closely associated with epistemic theories of democracy, which focus on whether the authority or legitimacy of democracy is grounded in epistemic considerations.[7] These views propose that political systems can be evaluated and justified based on their epistemic merits. This perspective contrasts with views that justify democracy based on non-epistemic considerations, such as fairness and equality.

There are broader ways in which "the epistemological is political." For instance, the spread of misinformation, increasing polarization, and declining trust in experts all demand epistemological analysis. Political epistemologists examine whether these phenomena are epistemically rational. They also explore the epistemic responsibilities of citizens, such as the obligation to be an informed voter and the need to moderate confidence in political views when faced with reasonable disagreement.

These various inquiries share a common thread: they evaluate our political world and attitudes from an epistemic perspective. These pursuits assume that we can assess political systems and phenomena, such as democracy, polarization, and partisanship, using epistemic criteria. For example, we can ask whether democracies *track the truth,* whether political beliefs are *truth-apt,* and whether polarization is *epistemically rational.* In essence, these questions highlight how epistemology can play a crucial role in understanding and shaping our response to political developments.

Another way to understand the subject matter of political epistemology is by identifying the specific questions studied by political epistemologists. These include:

- What is the proper role of truth in politics?
- Can democracy leverage the collective wisdom of the public?
- Does legitimate political authority hinge on epistemic considerations?
- Do voters have a moral or epistemic duty to vote responsibly?
- Does ignorance undermine the legitimacy of collective decisions?
- Is widespread voter ignorance rational?

6. Mill 1838.
7. Samaržija and Cassam 2023.

- Does politics make rational people behave irrationally?
- Is partisanship a social identity or a principled stance?
- Should we be humble in the face of widespread political disagreement?
- When is it legitimate to ignore expert judgment and trust your own?
- Is there any such thing as political expertise?

These and other related questions form the foundation of this book. Political epistemologists believe that by addressing the epistemic dimensions of political issues, we can make progress on both fundamental and contemporary problems in political philosophy. Even those who deny the relevance of epistemic considerations in politics are, in effect, engaging in political epistemology by taking a stance on these issues.

Why Now?

Just as laypeople have only recently become acquainted with the term "epistemology," philosophers themselves have only recently begun to recognize and use the term "political epistemology." A few years ago, one might have heard them respond with a puzzled, "politi. . . what?!"

While scholars have long been interested in topics at the intersection of political philosophy and epistemology, the past few years have witnessed a surge of new research in this area. Early mentions of "political epistemology" primarily identified it with theories of epistemic democracy, which focus on how the epistemic quality of decisions should justify democracy.[8] However, philosophers have since become attuned to the epistemic dimensions of a wider range of political phenomena.

Despite this growing interest, the fields of political philosophy and epistemology have traditionally evolved in isolation, without much cross-pollination or shared framing of questions. For instance, political philosophers have long debated reasonable disagreement, yet they have done so largely without engaging with epistemological research on peer disagreement.[9] Similarly, epistemologists have examined disagreement without drawing from the extensive political philosophy literature on political disagreement, even though it has been a central issue in that field for decades.

Recently, scholars have begun to systematically explore how the analytic and conceptual tools of epistemology bear on political philosophy, and vice versa. This growing attention has uncovered valuable new areas of research, where the seemingly abstract concepts of epistemology can be applied to pressing political issues. As a result, the past few years have witnessed a surge in work that forges stronger connections between these two fields.

8. Friedman 2014.
9. Enoch 2017.

Why are these fields now being brought together so explicitly? We speculate three contributing factors. First, it reflects a broader trend in philosophy, linking epistemology with other normative and evaluative domains, including ethics and social philosophy. Second, classic epistemological questions now have a concrete and identifiable expression in the political world, apt for discussion in media and academic settings. For instance, debates surrounding conspiracy theories and deepfakes provide an ideal backdrop for examining traditional questions about skepticism. Third, given our purported epistemological crisis, applying epistemological tools to political phenomena seems more urgent than ever. Perhaps for these reasons, contemporary philosophers have answered the *New Scientist's* call to "come out. . . of the shadows."[10]

Our goal is to provide a comprehensive guide to this burgeoning field. While the *Routledge Handbook of Political Epistemology* and the Oxford University Press volume titled *Political Epistemology* present a wide range of topics and cutting-edge research (and we highly recommend both, with one of us having edited them!), neither provides a cohesive map of the vast and complex terrain of political epistemology. This book aims to address this need by offering a comprehensive overview of the field, allowing readers to grasp the breadth of the landscape from a single vantage point.

With the growing emphasis on the relationship between epistemology and politics, there's a risk that epistemologists may overlook the intellectual debts owed to political theory. We are acutely aware that many issues at this intersection have a deep and rich history. Our aim is not to present these issues as entirely new, but to build on this long-standing tradition. By addressing these timeless concerns in the context of contemporary challenges, we seek to expand on the foundations laid by thinkers like Plato, Arendt, Rawls, and many others.

At the same time, we believe this venerable tradition can be enriched by the tools of contemporary epistemology. In his 1996 book *Justificatory Liberalism*, Gerald Gaus lamented that "the work of epistemologists and cognitive psychologists has been all but ignored" by contemporary political philosophers. He deemed this a "serious mistake."[11] Our goal is to bridge this gap and demonstrate the mutual benefits of increased dialogue between these fields of inquiry.

This book is written for both political philosophers and epistemologists, with the aim of showing how their respective projects and questions can complement and inform each other. While primarily a work of philosophy, it also engages with political theory, political psychology, and political science. We hope to appeal to a broad audience, including psychologists, social scientists, and anyone interested in the intersection of knowledge and politics.

We've designed this book to be accessible to undergraduates, graduate students, university professors, and (we hope) anyone intrigued by the epistemic dimensions of

10. New Scientist 2017.
11. Gaus 1996: vii.

politics. While some familiarity with philosophy may enrich your reading of this book, it's not strictly necessary. Further, we envision this text serving multiple purposes in academic settings; for instance, it could serve as a core text for specialized courses on the subject, or as a supplementary resource for a class on political philosophy, epistemology, or political theory. Beyond the classroom, we hope this work will spark thoughtful discussions about how to understand contemporary political issues.

Chapter Overviews

This book has ten chapters, each focusing on a key area of political epistemology. While not exhaustive, the chapters aim to address a broad range of topics, including the role of truth in politics, the epistemology of democracy, political ignorance and irrationality, the nature of political belief, disagreement and polarization, and the role of experts in a democracy. Each chapter is designed to be self-standing, allowing readers to engage with the material in any order they want. At the same time, the book is structured so that each chapter builds on those before it. The chapters also connect ideas across topics, highlighting the interconnected nature of the questions and challenges that define the field.

Chapter 1, "Truth & Politics," explores the fraught relationship between politics and truth. It highlights several reasons why true beliefs are essential for democracy, such as enabling informed citizens, holding leaders accountable, and preventing tyranny. However, it also shows how truth claims can be weaponized for political domination. The chapter considers numerous philosophical challenges to truth in politics, including doubts about objective political truths, our ability to know them, and how to identify genuine experts. Finally, it critically examines the claim that we are living in a "post-truth" era, concluding that truth remains essential to democracy.

Chapter 2, "Epistemic Democracy," examines whether democratic systems must make wise choices to be legitimate. It contrasts the idea that democracies must be fair and representative with the notion that they must make good decisions. The chapter discusses various theories of epistemic democracy, which argue that democratic processes, such as voting and deliberation, can lead to better outcomes by harnessing the collective wisdom of citizens. It ends by highlighting a central challenge: the development of a justification for democratic legitimacy that balances the epistemic value of good decision-making with the importance of fairness and inclusivity.

Chapter 3, "Epistemic Democracy Reconsidered," addresses significant criticisms of epistemic theories of democracy. It opens with a dilemma suggesting that justifying democracy through epistemology might be self-defeating. The chapter explores various responses, including direct attempts to resolve the dilemma, as well as alternative theories of epistemic democracy. It also examines justifications for democracy based on epistemic goals beyond truth, such as justified belief, reflective endorsement, and

understanding. While acknowledging that epistemic considerations might theoretically justify democracy, the chapter concludes by noting that practical issues like voter ignorance and irrationality could undermine democracy's purported epistemic value.

Chapter 4, "Political Ignorance," investigates the widespread lack of political knowledge among voters. It differentiates between informed, uninformed, and misinformed citizens, arguing that misinformed citizens are more detrimental to democracy than merely ignorant ones. The chapter then examines whether worries about political ignorance are exaggerated and whether voters have the right to be ignorant. It also explores whether political ignorance is rational, particularly given the low probability that any one vote will make a difference. The chapter then considers the possibility that strategic ignorance, rather than rational ignorance, better explains why many voters are misinformed. It concludes that widespread voter ignorance poses a fundamental challenge to the functioning of democracy and briefly sketches solutions to mitigate this problem.

Chapter 5, "Irrationality & Bias," examines how politics can impair our ability to think rationally. It explores partisan bias, showing how our political identities distort the ways we gather and interpret information to favor conclusions we want to reach. Perhaps surprisingly, greater political knowledge and intelligence often amplify rather than reduce this bias, with the most informed partisans typically being the most dogmatic. The chapter considers whether partisan bias might be a form of "rational irrationality" and tackles the contentious issue of whether irrationality is unevenly spread across the political spectrum. It concludes with a caution against labeling others as irrational in political discussions, since this can worsen polarization and political dysfunction.

Chapter 6, "Political Belief," challenges traditional assumptions about how people form their political beliefs. It argues that many political beliefs are not primarily aimed at truth but instead serve as social signals of group loyalty. The chapter explores whether people often feign political beliefs to show party allegiance, suggesting that political divides may be less profound than they appear. Additionally, it posits that many voters lack coherent ideologies, instead crafting ad hoc political opinions on the spot. These insights raise questions about democracy's foundations, particularly the notion that governments should respond to the preferences of citizens. The chapter concludes by calling for a reimagining of democratic processes in light of these complex realities of political thinking.

Chapter 7, "Political Disagreement," examines the causes and significance of political disagreements. It characterizes these disagreements as widespread, persistent, antagonistic, and clustered around seemingly unrelated topics. The chapter challenges the idea that disagreements arise from divergent values or factual beliefs, suggesting instead that party loyalty often shapes these beliefs. It also explores "deep disagreements" involving incompatible normative frameworks, and it rejects the view that we

should abandon rational debate for non-rational persuasion. The chapter considers how to respond to disagreement with peers, noting that partisans rarely view opponents as epistemic equals, while warning against dismissing others too easily. It concludes by highlighting the potential benefits of political debate, such as fostering understanding, tolerance, and compromise.

Chapter 8, "Polarization & Partisanship," investigates the nature, causes, consequences, and epistemic status of political polarization. It distinguishes between ideological, affective, group, and belief polarization, and it explores key drivers like partisan media, political leaders, and geographical sorting. The chapter evaluates whether polarization can be epistemically rational, concluding that it's often irrational in real-life politics. It also discusses the harms of polarization, from intolerance and violence to gridlock and democratic decline. However, this chapter also suggests that polarization may be a byproduct of groups struggling for equality against unjust systems, which challenges the narrative that polarization is to blame for current political problems.

Chapter 9, "Trust & Expertise," explores the complex relationship between expertise, trust, and democracy. It addresses the perceived crisis of trust in experts and the potential conflict between democratic principles and expert authority. The chapter proposes solutions, like dividing roles between citizens (who determine societal goals) and experts (who find ways to achieve these goals), while noting difficulties in separating facts from values. It examines various conceptions of expertise and their impact on democratic theory, discusses how to identify experts, and distinguishes various sources of skepticism about political expertise. The chapter also explains how the entanglement of facts and values could potentially justify partisan patterns of trust and distrust. It concludes by highlighting the promise and pitfalls of calls to "do your own research" and think for yourself.

Chapter 10, "Rethinking Democracy," contrasts two approaches to addressing democracy's epistemic flaws: limiting political influence to the most competent (i.e. epistocracy) and empowering ordinary citizens via random selection (i.e. sortition). It explores five types of epistocracy: restricted suffrage, plural voting, enfranchisement lotteries, epistocratic veto, and enlightened preference voting. It then considers general objections to epistocracy, such as unfairly excluding members of disadvantaged groups and the risk of abuse. The chapter also discusses optimistic proposals like "lottocracy" and "open democracy," which aim to increase citizen participation in self-government. While acknowledging their epistemic benefits, it raises concerns about these proposals, such as legislative incoherence, elite capture, lack of accountability, and blind deference. The chapter concludes by emphasizing the value of considering alternative political arrangements if we wish to leverage democracy's epistemic potential.

The Road Not Taken

While we have attempted to cover a wide variety of issues in political epistemology, some important topics were inevitably left out. We'll conclude by highlighting a few areas that we couldn't explore in depth, but which warrant further investigation.

First, we haven't extensively discussed the relationship between knowledge, power, and oppression, including work on standpoint theory, epistemic injustice, and epistemologies of ignorance. These topics, while relevant and significant to political epistemology, were omitted for two reasons. First, these subjects mainly illustrate how epistemological notions are inherently political, which falls outside our focus on how the political is epistemological. Second, there are already a number of overviews and introductions to these topics.

Second, while we recognize the importance of issues like fake news and the epistemology of social media, this book does not explore these topics in depth. Our decision was driven by three factors: limited space, our focus on foundational theoretical questions, and the rapidly evolving nature of these issues. Though these topics occasionally arise, particularly in our discussions of voter ignorance and polarization, a comprehensive treatment would require significantly more space and could quickly become outdated due to the fast-changing media and technology landscape. Instead, we've chosen to concentrate on enduring principles that provide a robust framework for analyzing both historical and emerging challenges in political epistemology. We believe this approach equips readers with the theoretical tools necessary to critically engage with a wide range of issues, including those posed by our rapidly changing information ecosystems.

For similar reasons, we have deliberately avoided anchoring our analyses too closely to recent political events, such as the election of Donald Trump and Brexit. Our aim is to explore enduring issues and underlying phenomena rather than their fleeting contemporary manifestations. Although we occasionally draw on current political examples to illustrate key concepts, our primary focus remains on philosophical analysis and timeless questions.

The field of political epistemology is brimming with opportunities for further exploration and research. While this book aspires to cover significant territory, we could not delve into several exciting areas that offer promising avenues for future scholarship. These include investigating the influence of epistemic virtues and vices in politics, the role of markets in generating and distributing knowledge, the interplay between non-ideal and ideal theory, and uncovering deeper connections between classic epistemological issues and their political implications. For instance, future research could examine whether internalism or externalism provides a more suitable theory of justification in political contexts, how political beliefs align with classic and stake-sensitive standards for knowledge, and how individual believers should adapt their

belief-forming practices in a hostile epistemic world. These inquiries represent novel expansions of political epistemology, bringing traditional epistemological debates into dialogue with urgent political concerns.

This list only scratches the surface of how epistemological tools can be applied to political phenomena. We hope this book inspires readers to delve deeper into both the topics we have chosen to address and those we were unable to cover in detail.

Chapter 1

Truth & Politics

> To the extent that we lose a sense of the value of truth, we shall certainly lose something and may well lose everything.
>
> — Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*

Introduction

In *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, Yuval Noah Harari writes:

> In 1905 an East African medium called Kinjikitile Ngwale claimed to be possessed by the snake spirit Hongo. The new prophet had a revolutionary message to the people of the German colony of East Africa: unite and drive out the Germans. To make the message more appealing, Ngwale provided his followers with magic medicine that would allegedly turn German bullets into water (*maji* in Swahili). Thus began the Maji Maji Rebellion. It failed. For on the battlefield, German bullets didn't turn into water. Rather, they tore mercilessly into the bodies of the ill-armed rebels.[1]

The Maji Maji Rebellion offers several important lessons, but perhaps the most essential is this: *true beliefs matter*. A distorted relationship to reality threatens our survival, ability to flourish, and the pursuit of nearly every human endeavor.

True beliefs are essential to human life, yet the public sphere is awash with misinformation and propaganda. Politicians peddle lies as facts and dismiss facts as lies. Social media users spread fake news faster and farther than previously imaginable. Partisan journalists selectively report the facts. Citizens are intellectually imprisoned in echo chambers, unable to see beyond their own beliefs. Conspiracy theorists erode trust in science, while populist leaders sow doubt in key democratic institutions. Our information environment is more hostile than ever. It seems we are living in a "post-truth" world.

1. Harari 2018: 278.

We have all heard this story. A dominant narrative of our time is that democracy is facing an epistemological crisis. In *The New York Times*, David Brooks says, "We live in a country in epistemological crisis."[2] In the *Boston Review*, Michael P. Lynch says we are "living through an epistemological crisis."[3] Most prominently, Barack Obama told *the Atlantic* that "we are entering into an epistemological crisis."[4] This is not only an American phenomenon. There has been a growing concern worldwide about the erosion of truth, the spread of misinformation, and the polarization of political beliefs.

Are we facing a deep-seated epistemic crisis? Many people certainly speak this way. It is important to remember, however, that politics and truth have long had a vexed relationship. As Hannah Arendt reminds us, "The story of the conflict between truth and politics is an old and complicated one."[5]

This fraught relationship between truth and politics is evident throughout the history of political thought. In the *Republic*, Plato banned poets and other artists from his ideal society for their provocative misrepresentations. Yet he also believed that truth could guide us only if shrouded by a great and noble lie. For Plato, ideal political leaders had ultimate access to the truth but were justified in propagating a myth to maintain social order. In *The Prince*, Niccolo Machiavelli claims it is often necessary for rulers to deceive others and manipulate the truth to achieve their objectives and maintain the stability of the state. In "Truth and Politics," Arendt observes that "no one, as far as I know, has ever counted truthfulness among the political virtues."[6] In his 2005 Nobel Prize Lecture, the British playwright Harold Pinter claims, "The majority of politicians... are interested not in truth but in power and in the maintenance of that power."[7] And George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* serves as a powerful reminder that truth is one of the major casualties of totalitarian regimes.

In this chapter, we explore the complex relationship between politics and truth. Although debates about truth's role in politics have been around as long as political philosophy itself, our aim is not to provide a comprehensive overview of this issue or its historical pedigree. Instead, we will highlight some enduring philosophical concerns and perspectives about the proper role of truth in politics.

1. What is Truth?

In the Gospel of John in the *New Testament*, Jesus claims that he is "witness to the truth."[8] Pontius Pilate famously retorts, "What is truth?"

2. Brooks 2020.
3. Lynch 2021.
4. Nyce 2020.
5. Arendt 1968: 229.
6. Arendt 1968: 227.
7. Pinter 2005.
8. John 18:37.

The meaning of Pilate's statement is debated. Some argue that it was made in jest, suggesting the trial was a farce. Others propose that he was remarking on the difficulty of discerning the truth. Regardless of its meaning, philosophers have attempted to earnestly answer his question by analyzing what truth is.

There are various philosophical views regarding the nature of truth. The most common interpretation is the *correspondence theory*, which simply states that truth is whatever corresponds to reality. This theory assumes that there is an objective reality independent of our beliefs or perceptions. By contrast, the *coherence theory* emphasizes internal consistency and logical coherence as the basis for truth. A statement or proposition is considered true if it fits harmoniously with other statements within a particular framework. According to *deflationism*, truth is not a substantial property or deep philosophical notion, but rather a trivial or redundant feature of language. To assert that a statement is true is simply to assert the statement itself, without adding any substantial content. Finally, *pragmatist theories* posit that truth is a tool that helps us navigate and cope with the world: a "true" position is one that stands up to collective scrutiny. Truth is not an abstract or static property, but rather a practical guide for action, problem-solving, and coordinating.

Although these views are contested, adopting a specific philosophical theory about the nature of truth is unlikely to resolve political concerns about truth. This is because political disputes do not hinge on abstract conceptions of truth but rather on deeper disagreements about evidence, authority, and trust. In the political realm, even if we agree on a theory of truth, we may still disagree about how truth is established, who gets to determine it, and which sources of knowledge are reliable. Thus, addressing political concerns about truth requires more than a commitment to any single philosophical theory. Ultimately, resolving political disputes about truth requires addressing the underlying conflicts over evidence, authority, and trust, rather than relying on abstract philosophical theories of truth alone. For now, we can work with a simple definition that we borrow from Voltaire: "Let us define truth, while waiting for a better definition... as a statement of the facts as they are."[9]

2. Why Truth Matters for Democracy

Truth plays a critical role in politics. In any political system, access to truth can enable citizens to understand political decisions, hold leaders accountable, and resist tyranny. However, truth has special importance in democratic contexts. When power is dispersed and citizens participate in decision-making, the need for truth becomes even more pronounced. Democracy relies on an electorate capable of making well-informed decisions, which is why it is particularly vulnerable to the erosion of truth.

9. Voltaire [1766] 1929: 305.

Thus, truth and truthfulness are especially valuable in democratic contexts.

Despite the importance of truth in democratic societies, the ideals of democracy and the pursuit of truth have a complex relationship. Some believe that democracy must aim at truth to be legitimate, while others argue that democratic ideals conflict with our epistemic goals, such as truth-seeking. We will return to this debate shortly. For now, we want to highlight several interlocking reasons why truth plays an essential role in any democracy:

1. *The Need for an Informed Electorate*

   A well-functioning democracy requires an informed citizenry. Access to the truth empowers citizens to make informed decisions about their government and its representatives, better equipping them to participate in the democratic process. Without access to the truth, citizens cannot make knowledgeable decisions about how to vote or what policies to support. A poorly informed citizen may even vote for policies or politicians that are against their own interests.

2. *The Need for Accountability*

   Political leaders are elected to serve the public interest. To ensure they fulfill their responsibilities, we must monitor their activities, assess the effectiveness of their policies, and hold them accountable for their failures. This requires the electorate to have access to accurate information. A free press, transparency, and oversight bodies are crucial in exposing misconduct and policy inefficiencies, assuring that leaders remain answerable to the public they serve.

3. *The Need to Prevent Tyranny*

   Public allegiance to truth is a safeguard against tyranny. Governments often engage in wrongful or incompetent actions, which they have an incentive to conceal. Citizens must be able to oversee and monitor these actions. To do so, they must have access to accurate information. If we know what governments are doing, they are less likely to get away with corruption and tyranny. Truthfulness is therefore required for restraining tyrants and preventing corruption.[10]

4. *The Need for Meaningful Public Discourse*

   Truth and truthfulness are required for citizens to engage in meaningful public discourse, which many regard as the foundation of a democratic society. Democracy involves open forums, passionate arguments, and public speech. This reflects a deliberative conception of democracy (see Chapter 2). Truth and truthfulness are critical components of meaningful public discourse because they ensure that the ideas and information being exchanged are accurate and reliable.

10. Williams 2002: 207.

5. *The Need for Liberty*

   Truth is necessary for liberty. As Bernard Williams argues, "The falsification or suppression of information is an important limitation of liberty in itself and impedes the exercise of liberty in many areas."[11] First, denying people access to information violates liberty directly, e.g., their right to information. Second, it undermines liberty in other areas because effective action requires accurate information. Third, false and distorted information has been used to justify policies that undermine individual liberties. During the Cold War, for instance, the Soviet Union used propaganda to promote the idea of a socialist utopia and to portray the West as corrupt and decadent. This propaganda was used to justify censorship, political repression, and the suppression of dissent.

6. *The Need for Political Legitimacy*

   Lack of truth can undermine the legitimacy of political systems. Political legitimacy refers to the acceptance and recognition of political authority as valid. When political leaders and institutions operate with transparency, honesty, and integrity, they are more likely to gain the trust and support of the public. By contrast, when political leaders lie or misrepresent the truth, their legitimacy can be questioned. If citizens cannot trust their leaders to tell the truth, they may become cynical and disengaged from the political process. The erosion of trust in political leaders and institutions can also exacerbate polarization, which can further threaten political legitimacy.

The above considerations suggest that the public has a "right to know" and access relevant information.[12] This right is grounded in several key ideas, including the need to make informed decisions, hold government officials accountable, establish political legitimacy, foster meaningful public discourse, prevent abuses of power, promote public trust, and protect liberty. A right to know does not entail that the government has a duty to inform its citizens of everything it does. There may sometimes be legitimate reasons to keep certain information secret, such as to protect national security or individual privacy. However, the government does have a duty to provide citizens with access to information that is relevant to their lives and the functioning of democracy.

3. The Assault on Truth

A thriving democracy requires access to truth and a culture of truthfulness. However, in recent years, allegiance to truth has come under attack. This attack has come from two directions. The first is a *philosophical attack* on truth, which claims that the very idea

11. Williams 2002: 211.
12. UNESCO 2011.

Further Resources

Arendt, Hannah (1968). "Truth and Politics." In *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. Reprinted in 1977. Penguin, pp. 227–264.

Elkins, Zachary, and Pippa Norris (eds.) (2012). *Truth and Democracy*. Pennsylvania University Press.

Estlund, David (1993). "Making Truth Safe for Democracy." In David Copp, Jean Hampton, & John E. Roemer (eds.), *The Idea of Democracy*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 71–100.

Hannon, Michael (2023). "The Politics of Post-Truth." *Critical Review*, 35(1–2), pp. 40–62.

Landemore, Hélène (2013). "Political Cognitivism: A Defense." In *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many*. Princeton University Press.

Lynch, Michael (2025). *On Truth in Politics: Why Democracy Demands It*. Princeton University Press.

MacMullen, Ian (2020). "What is 'Post-Factual' Politics?" *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 28.1, pp. 97–116.

Misak, Cheryl (2002). *Truth, Politics, Morality: Pragmatism and Deliberation*. Routledge.

Rosenfeld, Sophia (2019). *Democracy and Truth: A Short History*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Chapter 2

Epistemic Democracy

> The many, each of whom individually is not an excellent man, nevertheless may, when they come together, be better than the few best people.
>
> — Aristotle, *Politics*

Introduction

What does democracy have to do with *epistemology*? According to many thinkers, not much. Democracy aspires to be a community of free and equal citizens. Each person is granted an equal share of formal political power regardless of the intellectual rigor of their opinions. In this system, everyone has an equal voice in shaping the laws governing their shared political lives.

However, we also want political institutions to promote good outcomes. Our aim is to make the *right* political decisions—ones grounded in knowledge and wisdom, not ignorance or prejudice. Decisions based on misinformation or bias often lead to disastrous results. The challenge is not only to uphold procedures that respect citizens' freedom and equality but also to ensure that these processes lead to wise decisions that benefit society as a whole.

These two criteria can conflict.[1] As Gerald Gaus remarks, democracy involves "an uncomfortable balance between fairness and stupidity."[2] If we insist on making political decisions through fair and inclusive procedures, we risk being governed by what John Stuart Mill called the "collective mediocrity" of the public.[3] To illustrate this tension, compare two fictional societies:

Dumbocracy

1. Estlund 2008.
2. Gaus 2011: 271.
3. Mill [1859] 1977: 268.

Imagine a society whose citizens are profoundly ignorant and prejudiced. Call it "Dumbocracy." This society follows democratic procedures; for example, every adult citizen has an equal opportunity to participate in the political process. However, because the citizens of Dumbocracy are poorly informed and lack competence, their democratic choices often lead to bad outcomes that thwart their goals. For example, when they want to reduce crime, they elect leaders and pass policies that actually increase crime. Although their choices are democratically fashioned, they tend to produce bad results.

Intellitopia

Now imagine a different society governed by a brilliant and benevolent leader (or leaders). Call it "Intellitopia." In this society, political decisions are not made democratically; for example, citizens do not have the right to vote in free and fair elections, and leaders are not accountable to the populace. Instead, the citizens of Intellitopia must obey the laws and decisions made by their wise and benevolent rulers. Fortunately, the rulers of Intellitopia are highly informed and morally virtuous, so they choose rules and policies that best serve the population as a whole.

Where would you prefer to live, Dumbocracy or Intellitopia?

If you feel inclined to choose Dumbocracy, it's likely because you think that democratic *procedures* are valuable independently of the outcomes they produce. If you are instead drawn to Intellitopia, it's probably because you think that making the *right* (correct, accurate) decisions matters most; hence, we should use whatever procedures yield the best results.

Although these two societies are fictional, they illustrate an important point: an utterly non-democratic procedure could, in principle, produce better decisions than a democratic one. Thus, the goal of making *democratic* decisions can conflict with the goal of making *good* decisions, where "good" is understood in terms of the correctness (or epistemic quality) of the outcome. Given that these criteria can conflict, how much weight should we assign to each?

In this chapter, we investigate two basic accounts of political legitimacy: *proceduralism* and *instrumentalism*. Proceduralists argue that democracy's legitimacy resides in the procedures it follows and the principles it embodies, not the outcomes it produces. On this view, we value democracy "not because as a regime we trust it to get things right—we value it rather because it reflects the equality of citizens" or realizes some other non-instrumental good, such as autonomy.[4] An increasing number of theorists find purely procedural defenses of democracy inadequate. Against them, instrumentalists argue that good outcomes, not just good procedures, justify political systems. The instrumental theory *of democracy* holds, first, that we ought to imple-

4. Muirhead 2014: 125.

ment whichever form of government produces the best consequences and, second, that democracy is the system most likely to deliver those outcomes.[5]

Many instrumentalists defend the distinctively *epistemic* benefits of democracy. This has been called the "epistemic turn" in democratic theory.[6] While this idea has gained traction recently, the relevance of epistemology to the justification of democracy was first considered by the ancient Greeks, as we'll see below.

1. Democracy and Knowledge in Ancient Greece

Ancient Greece is often considered the birthplace of democracy, emerging around the sixth century BCE. It was celebrated by figures like Pericles, who praised it for promoting equal participation and placing power "in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people."[7] However, not all ancient Greek thinkers were fans of democracy. In fact, many were critical of it on epistemic grounds. The historian Thucydides blamed citizen ignorance for the decision to invade Sicily during the Peloponnesian War (415–13 BCE), which led to the worst defeat in Athenian history.[8] More famously, Plato attacked the epistemic merits of democracy in the *Republic*. He warned that despite its initial attraction in offering freedom and equality to all, democracy problematically "assigns a sort of equality to equals and unequals alike."[9]

1.1 Plato's Pessimism

The central flaw of democracy, according to Plato, is that it gives power to the uninformed while ignoring the wise few. He vividly illustrates this idea through the metaphor of a ship.[10] The ship is left to squabbling sailors—symbolizing demagogues and orators—who compete for control without truly knowing how to steer. These sailors manipulate the owner through flattery and persuasion, each claiming to know the best route, yet none possessing real navigational expertise. As a result, the ship is in constant chaos and in danger of sinking, missing the steady hand of a skilled captain. Analogously, Plato believed that democratic citizens would often be swayed by emotion and rhetoric, rather than by reason and knowledge, leading to poor decision-making and political instability.

Instead of democracy, Plato advocated for *epistocracy*—rule by the knowers. He believed that citizens were too incompetent to rule themselves, so political decision-making should be made by experts. Essentially, he wanted us to live in a society like

5. Arneson 2009: 197.
6. Landemore 2017.
7. Thucydides 1974: II: s.34.
8. Somin 2009: 588.
9. Plato 2004: 558c5.
10. Plato 2004: 488a.

Intellitopia.

Plato's challenge animates a number of contemporary critiques of democracy. In later chapters, we explore voter ignorance (Chapter 4) and irrationality (Chapter 5), the role of experts in a democracy (Chapter 9), and the merits of epistocracy (Chapter 10). In this chapter, we attempt to answer Plato's challenge by investigating what can be said in favor of democracy on epistemic grounds. As Aristotle was the first to challenge Plato's claim that democracy is epistemically flawed, we begin by examining his perspective.

1.2 Aristotle's Optimism

Aristotle was more optimistic than Plato about the collective wisdom of ordinary people. Although Aristotle was no friend of democracy, he argued that a large group of people may collectively perform better than a small group of experts. In *Politics*, he writes:

> The view that the majority rather than those who are the best people, albeit few, should be in control would seem to be well stated, and to involve some puzzles, though perhaps also some truth. For the many, each of whom individually is not an excellent man, nevertheless may, when they have come together, be better than the few best people, not individually but collectively.[11]

Aristotle's claim is that under the right circumstances, a group of ordinary people may judge more wisely than a smaller group of experts.

This idea may seem counterintuitive. How could a large group of non-experts make wiser decisions than a smaller group of experts? There are two ways to interpret Aristotle's proposal. On the one hand, we might see Aristotle as a precursor to modern forms of "deliberative democracy," where citizens make informed judgments based on exchanging reasons in democratic contexts. On the other hand, he might be advocating for a simple aggregation procedure, such as voting.[12] These interpretations suggest two different "epistemic engines" for democracy, which we explore in §4 and §5.

1.3 Two Visions of Democracy

Plato and Aristotle offer two competing visions of democracy. For Plato, democracy is epistemically counterproductive: it prioritizes liberty and equality for citizens at the expense of true opinions and sound decisions. Plato, therefore, recommends a non-democratic alternative, which distributes political power according to knowledge and competence—a kind of epistemic authoritarianism. By contrast, Aristotle more

11. Aristotle 2017: 1281a40-b3.
12. Lane 2013.

optimistically suggests that democracy can leverage the wisdom of citizens, rendering "the many" more reliable than the virtuous few. In doing so, Aristotle laid the foundation for an epistemic defense of democracy.

Both Plato's and Aristotle's arguments are versions of instrumentalism. As discussed earlier, instrumentalism is the view that political power should be distributed in ways that promote good outcomes. Importantly, instrumentalism comes in both epistemic and non-epistemic forms. For example, William Riker defends a non-epistemic instrumental account of democracy, arguing that a political system is legitimate if it ensures social stability and order.[13] Our focus in this book, however, is exclusively on *epistemic* versions of instrumentalism, which maintain that political institutions and procedures ought to promote *epistemically* good decisions. For simplicity, we will use "instrumental" to refer specifically to epistemic versions of instrumentalism, setting aside non-epistemic versions of instrumentalism.

Just as there are non-epistemic forms of instrumentalism, there are also *non-instrumental* epistemic arguments for democracy. These views claim that democracy is valuable because it cultivates responsible epistemic agency, regardless of outcomes.[14] We will reserve discussion of non-instrumentalist epistemic accounts for the next chapter, focusing here on instrumentalist views.

Recall that the main alternative to instrumentalism is proceduralism. The key difference between proceduralism and instrumentalism is the emphasis on process versus outcome, respectively. We examine each in turn.

2. Proceduralism

What justifies democracy? Proceduralists claim that democratic decisions are justified by *how* they are made. The central thesis of proceduralism is that the legitimacy of political decisions stems from the procedures used to reach them rather than from the correctness or quality of the outcomes.

Although procedural arguments for democracy come in many forms, they generally emphasize how democratic processes embody key moral values such as fairness, equality, and respect. For example, Thomas Christiano argues that democracy is intrinsically valuable because it treats all citizens as equals, providing them with an equal opportunity to influence political decisions and shape their own political lives.[15] Others claim that democracy is valuable because it prevents domination, fosters collective autonomy, or helps achieve an inclusive and free society.[16] These approaches all frame the authority, legitimacy, or value of democracy in non-instrumental terms,

13. Riker 1982.
14. Peter 2013.
15. Christiano 2008; also Cohen 1996; Griffin 2003; Kolodny 2014; Lafont 2020; Viehoff 2014.
16. Anderson 2008; Pettit 2012; Young 2002.

Further Resources

Anderson, Elizabeth (2006). "The Epistemology of Democracy." *Episteme*, 3(1), pp. 8–22.

Brennan, Jason and Hélène Landemore (2022). *Debating Democracy: Do We Need More or Less?* Oxford University Press.

Christiano, Thomas (2004). "The Authority of Democracy." *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 12(3), pp. 266–290.

Estlund, David (2008). *Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework*. Princeton University Press.

Goodin, Robert E. and Kai Spiekermann (2018). *An Epistemic Theory of Democracy*. Oxford University Press.

Landemore, Hélène (2012). *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many*. Princeton University Press.

Peter, Fabienne (2009). *Democratic Legitimacy*. Routledge.

Schwartzberg, Melissa (2015). "Epistemic Democracy and Its Challenges." *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 18, pp. 187–203.

Urbinati, Nadia (2014). *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People*. Harvard University Press.

Chapter 3

Epistemic Democracy Reconsidered

> Democracy is a regime of liberty, not *episteme*.
> — Nadia Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured*

Introduction

If truth and democracy had a relationship status, it would be: "It's complicated." On the one hand, a commitment to democracy may seem at odds with our epistemic goals, given the ignorance and biases of many citizens. This was Plato's view. He believed that democracy risks rule by the mediocre majority. On the other hand, democracy might support rather than hinder our epistemic goals. By including diverse perspectives in decision-making, we might harness the wisdom of the many.

In this chapter, we explore some foundational challenges to epistemic theories of democracy, as well as attempts to answer them. In §1, we consider a central puzzle for epistemic democracy: How can we know whether democratic decision-making procedures are reliable without making controversial assumptions about which outcomes are the "right" ones? If we already know which standards or outcomes are correct, then appealing to democratic procedures seems unnecessary, even reckless. Yet if we can't know the correct standards, we lose the ability to justify democracy on *epistemic* grounds. The epistemic democrat thus seems caught in a dilemma.

This dilemma frames the rest of the chapter. We consider numerous responses to this basic challenge. In §2, we briefly outline four alternatives to epistemic instrumentalist accounts of democracy: epistocracy, non-epistemic instrumentalism, epistemic proceduralism, and pure proceduralism. In §3, we examine whether epistemic democrats can resolve this dilemma without abandoning epistemic instrumentalism. In §4, we argue that even if epistemic democrats can avoid this dilemma, they face a further challenge: they risk objectionably betting democracy on epistemology.

In light of these concerns, we consider alternative epistemological approaches to

democracy. In §5, we discuss David Estlund's defense of *epistemic proceduralism*, which blends both epistemic and procedural elements. In §6, we consider Fabienne Peter's defense of *pure epistemic proceduralism*, which does not depend on procedure-independent standards for good outcomes but instead relies on a purely proceduralist epistemology. In §7, we examine a *pragmatist* argument for epistemic democracy. Finally, in §8, we consider nonstandard instrumentalist views, which decenter truth in favor of other epistemic goals. Ultimately, we conclude that one of the main challenges for epistemic democracy is not theoretical but rather empirical. As the subsequent chapters in this book illustrate, contemporary societies face a range of problems—from ignorance and irrationality to disagreement and polarization—that appear to threaten the epistemic promise of democracy.

1. Is Epistemic Democracy Self-Undermining?

Here we consider a fundamental puzzle for epistemic instrumentalist theories of democracy. (Recall from Chapter 2 that epistemic instrumentalists claim that political institutions and procedures are justified insofar as they promote epistemically good outcomes.) Peter calls this puzzle "the authority dilemma," which she summarizes as follows:

> **The Authority Dilemma**
>
> 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.[1]

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

Her argument is as follows. For epistemic democracy to be valid, there must be a procedure-independent standard for determining the correctness of outcomes. But to justify democracy on epistemic grounds, we must first be able to identify the appropriate epistemic standard of judgment. This implies that there must be an individual or group with the authority to determine which democratic decisions are correct. If political institutions are justified by the quality of their outcomes, then someone must be in a position to evaluate those outcomes—otherwise, we would have no way to verify whether the institutions are truly justified.

However, this creates a dilemma. If we defer to those who know what the correct decision is, then the democratic process becomes redundant, as we would simply follow the experts rather than engage in genuine democratic decision-making. On the

1. Peter 2016: 138.

other hand, if we insist on preserving the democratic decision-making process, we lose the ability to justify it on epistemic grounds, since we are no longer relying on the authority of those who know the correct answers.[2]

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.[3]

In this situation, a democratic decision would be misguided. The town engineer is a known expert, so his verdict should suffice 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, in cases like this, there is no epistemic justification for a democratic process. 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."[4]

Other critics have framed this as an *epistemological problem* for epistemic theories of democracy.[5] 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.[6] 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. 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 reasonable disagreement.[7] However, this 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. As Hans Kelsen remarks,

2. Kelsen 1955: 2, Waldron 1999: 252–4, and Valentini 2012: 191 raise a similar challenge.
3. Peter 2016: 134.
4. Peter 2016: 134.
5. Gaus 2011; Ingham 2013; Muirhead 2014.
6. Dahl 1989; Estlund 2008; Rawls 1993; Waldron 1999.
7. Peter 2023.

> 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.[8]

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 epistemic instrumentalism. This presents a theoretical, rather than empirical, challenge to epistemic theories of democracy. It suggests that offering a truly epistemic justification for democracy may be impossible.

2. Avoiding the Dilemma

To answer this challenge, we would need a way to justify democracy based on its capacity to make good decisions without falling into the authority dilemma or relying on controversial assumptions about which decisions are the "right" ones. But is this possible?

One might initially think that the authority dilemma does not apply to certain aggregative conceptions of democracy, such as those that rely on Condorcet's jury theorem (CJT) (see Chapter 2). According to CJT, if each voter has a better-than-even chance of making the right decision, the likelihood that the majority will reach the correct outcome increases as the size of the electorate grows. On this view, we don't need to know in advance what the correct outcomes are; rather, we just need to establish that the conditions for CJT are met, allowing us to trust that democratic outcomes will be epistemically reliable without identifying the correct decision beforehand.

However, a version of the authority dilemma still arises for CJT. To apply the theorem, we need to assess whether the electorate is more reliable than chance on the relevant issues. This requires us to make judgments about the competence of the voters, which in turn presupposes knowledge of what the correct outcomes would be. Without such knowledge, we cannot verify whether the electorate is, in fact, more reliable than random chance. Thus, even with CJT, we are left needing an independent standard for evaluating the competence of voters, which brings us back into the same dilemma: either we presuppose epistemic authority and undermine the need for democratic procedures, or we rely on democratic processes without being able to justify their epistemic value.[9]

Hence, Peter thinks we must reject instrumental epistemic theories of democracy. She concludes, "The attempt to defend democracy on epistemic instrumentalist

8. Kelsen 1955: 2.
9. Peter 2023: 85.

Further Resources

Bagg, Samuel (2018). "The Power of the Multitude: Answering Epistemic Challenges to Democracy." *American Political Science Review*, 112(4), pp. 891–904.

Benson, Jonathan (2024). *Intelligent Democracy: Answering the New Democratic Scepticism*. Oxford University Press.

Gaus, Gerald (1996). *Justificatory Liberalism: An Essay on Epistemology and Political Theory*. Oxford University Press.

Hannon, Michael (2020). "Empathetic Understanding and Deliberative Democracy." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 101(3), pp. 591–611.

Ingham, Sean (2013). "Disagreement and Epistemic Arguments for Democracy." *Politics, Philosophy & Economics*, 12(2), pp. 136–155.

Lepoutre, Maxime C. (2022). "Political Understanding." *British Journal of Political Science*, 53(2), pp. 346–365.

Misak, Cheryl (2002). *Truth, Politics, Morality: Pragmatism and Deliberation*. Routledge.

Peter, Fabienne (2016). "The Epistemic Circumstances of Democracy." In Michael Brady and Miranda Fricker (eds.), *The Epistemic Life of Groups: Essays in the Epistemology of Collectives*. Oxford University Press.

Samaržija, Hana, and Quassim Cassam, eds. (2023). *The Epistemology of Democracy*. Taylor & Francis.

Talisse, Robert B. (2009). "Folk Epistemology and the Justification of Democracy." In Raf Geenens and Ronald Tinnevelt (eds.), *Does Truth Matter? Democracy and Public Space*. Springer Netherlands, pp. 41–54.

Chapter 4

Political Ignorance

> There now seems to be a consensus that... most citizens think and know jaw-droppingly little about politics.
>
> — Robert Luskin

Introduction

A critical component of democratic citizenship is knowledge about politics. As James Madison once said, a popular government without an informed public "is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both."[1] In *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters*, one of the most authoritative studies on voter knowledge, the authors declare: "Democracy functions best when its citizens are politically informed."[2] But are citizens knowledgeable enough to vote responsibly? Will they competently exercise their political power over others?

One of the most consistent findings in political science over the past 60 years is the staggering degree to which citizens are ignorant about politics. The average voter is ignorant of even the most basic political information, such as who their elected officials are, what their opponents believe, and which important laws or policies were passed in recent years. A poll conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2012 found that only 53% of the American public linked Republicans with favoring small government, 61% connected Republicans with abortion limits, and 67% tied Democrats to higher taxes for the wealthy. This last issue was a top Democratic concern in the year that the poll was conducted.[3]

For those with an interest in politics, it's easy to forget how strikingly little most people know about political issues. If you're reading this book, then you probably live, work, and socialize with individuals who are highly politically informed. However,

1. Madison [1822] 1999: 790.
2. Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996: 1.
3. Pew Research Center 2012b.

once we step outside our social bubbles, we find that the state of political knowledge is bleak. Here's what some renowned political scientists have to say about the extent and depth of voter ignorance:

> The public is overwhelmingly ignorant when it comes to politics... [This] is one of the strongest findings that have been produced by any social science—possibly *the* strongest.[4]

> The sheer depth of most individual voters' ignorance may be shocking to readers not familiar with the research.[5]

> Nothing strikes the student of public opinion and democracy more forcefully than the paucity of information most people possess about politics.[6]

There are entire books documenting just how little citizens know, such as *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters*, *The Perils of Perception*, and *Democracy and Political Ignorance*.[7] We recommend these books to anyone looking for depressing evidence of public ignorance. The latter study reports that "only 13% of the more than 2,000 political questions could be answered correctly by 75% or more of those asked." These questions are not mere political trivia. On the contrary, "many of the facts known by relatively small percentages of the public seem critical to understanding—let alone acting in—the political world."[8]

Consider the following striking example. On average, Americans believe that 25% of the national budget is given to foreign aid. In reality, it is less than three-fourths of 1%. Only 5% of people know this. Moreover, 1 in 10 people think that more than 50% is given annually to other countries![9] Yet, citizens are expected to vote on candidates and platforms advocating different policies on national spending. How can they make an informed decision if they have false views about how much is already being spent?

While the political ignorance of American voters is especially well documented, we assume that Americans are not unique in this respect. A month before the UK Brexit vote in 2016, a national poll revealed that Leave voters believed that EU immigrants comprised 20% of the UK's population. The actual figure is closer to 5%. In addition to overestimating how many EU-born people now live in the UK, both Leave and Remain voters drastically underestimated the amount of foreign investment from the European Union, and they enormously overestimated the proportion of Child Benefit awards given to families in other European countries.[10]

4. Friedman 1998: 397.
5. Somin 2016: 17.
6. Ferejohn 1990: 3.
7. Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Duffy 2018; Somin 2016.
8. Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996: 101–2.
9. Kaiser Family Foundation 2013.
10. Ipsos 2016.

What does this show? It indicates that most of us have significantly distorted perceptions of social reality. Walter Lippmann, arguably the most influential journalist of the 20th century, highlights this in his book *Public Opinion*. Lippmann was critical of democracy, arguing that citizens don't have an accurate view of "the world outside" but rather operate with highly incomplete and distorted "pictures in their head."[11]

More than one hundred years after Lippmann's critique of democracy, there is now an overwhelming consensus based on a huge and diverse range of studies: most citizens know shockingly little about politics. In fact, these depressing findings may *overestimate* the actual level of voter knowledge. These surveys often take the form of multiple-choice tests; thus, citizens who do not know the correct answer may simply guess. When they get lucky, the survey counts them as "knowing" the answer.[12] But knowledge requires more than lucky true belief.[13] A belief amounts to knowledge only when it is *justified* or *reliable* or *safe from error*. It's not enough to simply get the answer right.

1. The Ignorance of Others

In the wake of two surprising election results in 2016—Brexit in the UK and the election of Donald Trump in the US—a common opinion in both Europe and America was that the winning sides of these electorates were ignorant. In *Foreign Policy* magazine, for instance, we were told that "Trump owes his victory to the uninformed."[14] The portrayal of the Brexit voter in the UK's media was largely similar.[15] In general, losing sides of the electorate tend to explain their loss by citing the ignorance of their political opponents.[16]

It's natural to regard our political opponents as uninformed. After all, when we hold a belief, we necessarily regard it as true.[17] For instance, if I believe that climate change is caused by human activity, then I believe *it's true* that human activity is driving climate change. If someone disagrees, I must think their belief is false. Now, I needn't think they're less knowledgeable *in general*, but I must think they are wrong about the issue at hand. Therefore, it's not surprising that we might see those with different political beliefs as lacking relevant knowledge.

This conclusion is intensified by the fact that political beliefs tend to cluster together, at least in the US. For instance, those who support abortion rights are more likely to favor gun control and welfare programs. If you're pro-choice on abortion,

11. Lippmann [1922] 1998: 3.
12. Somin 2016: 26; Brennan 2016a: 27.
13. Gettier 1963.
14. Brennan 2016b.
15. Fuller 2019.
16. Herbert 2004.
17. Williams 1973.

there's a good chance you support raising the minimum wage and advocate government intervention to combat climate change. By contrast, if you're against abortion, then you're likely against gun control, oppose raising the minimum wage, and resist government regulation on climate change.[18]

This pattern also holds for issues like mandatory paid maternity leave, gay marriage, and flag burning. As Jason Brennan says, "If I know your stance on any one of these issues, I can predict with a high degree of reliability what your stance is on all the others."[19] This is surprising because these issues seem *logically unrelated*. The arguments against gun control, for instance, have little to do with the arguments for abortion.

This clustering of political opinion may give us a further reason to regard our political adversaries as less knowledgeable. If we disagree on a topic like abortion, then it's likely we'll disagree on many other matters. This is true for both logically related and unrelated beliefs. For example, Adam Elga says that two people who disagree about abortion also likely disagree about "whether human beings have souls, whether it is permissible to withhold treatment from certain terminally ill infants, and whether rights figure prominently in a correct ethical theory."[20]

To generalize: if I think you're wrong about issue A, and beliefs about A typically pattern with beliefs about B, C, D, and E, then our disagreement about A might lead me to think we disagree about B through E. Further, it's psychologically impossible to regard our *own* beliefs as false (I cannot both believe p and believe p is false). So, I will likely conclude that you are less informed not just about A, but also about B, C, D, and E. We should therefore expect citizens to regard those with different political beliefs as systematically less informed, not just about the issue at hand but about other topics as well.

2. Informed, Uninformed, and Misinformed

Political ignorance is a bipartisan phenomenon. There is little evidence that members of one political party are overall more ignorant or misinformed than others. Rather, ignorance seems evenly distributed across partisan lines.[21]

In a 2015 News IQ survey, the Pew Research Center asked people to answer a series of questions about current events.[22] They found very few partisan differences in knowledge. On average, the Republicans in the sample answered 8.3 of 12 items correctly, and the Democrats answered 7.9 items correctly. Their 2013 survey showed

18. Brennan 2016a: 41; also Joshi 2020.
19. Brennan 2016a: 41.
20. Elga 2007: 493.
21. Somin 2016.
22. Pew Research Center 2015.

Further Resources

Brennan, Jason (2016). *Against Democracy*. Princeton University Press.

Caplan, Bryan (2007). *The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies*. Princeton University Press.

Friedman, Jeffrey (2019). *Power Without Knowledge*. Oxford University Press.

Kaye, Simon T. (2015). "Democracy Despite Ignorance: Questioning the Veneration of Knowledge in Politics." *Critical Review*, 27(3-4), pp. 316–337.

Lippmann, Walter ([1922] 1998). *Public Opinion*. Transaction Publishers.

Lupia, Arthur (2006). "How Elitism Undermines the Study of Voter Competence." *Critical Review*, 18(1-3), pp. 217–232.

Somin, Ilya (2016). *Democracy and Political Ignorance: Why Smaller Government Is Smarter*. Stanford University Press.

Sullivan, Shannon, and Nancy Tuana (eds.) (2007). *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*. SUNY Press.

Williams, Daniel (2020). "Motivated Ignorance, Rationality, and Democratic Politics." *Synthese*, 198(8), pp. 7807–7827.

Chapter 5

Irrationality & Bias

> So convenient a thing is it to be a rational creature, since it enables us to find or make a reason for everything one has a mind to.
>
> — Ben Franklin

Introduction

John Stuart Mill believed that getting citizens involved in politics would make them smarter and nobler. He posited that public deliberation on political matters is good for democracy, as it provides citizens "the opportunity of exchanging error for truth" and a chance to acquire a "livelier impression of truth."[1]

Others are less optimistic. Joseph Schumpeter, a highly influential 20th-century economist, argues that political engagement not only fails to make us smarter or nobler, but it actually renders us less rational and more foolish. Schumpeter writes:

> The typical citizen drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field. He argues and analyzes in a way which he would readily recognize as infantile within the sphere of his real interests. He becomes a primitive again.[2]

Likewise, Jason Brennan says that politics is *bad for us*. It "not only fails to educate or ennoble us but also tends to stultify and corrupt us."[3]

Is this worry justified? Does politics make rational people believe and behave in irrational ways? A considerable amount of evidence suggests as much. In what's been called "the most depressing brain finding ever," politics was shown to corrupt even basic mathematical reasoning.[4] In an experiment by Dan Kahan and his collaborators,

1. Mill [1859] 2001: 19.
2. Schumpeter [1942] 2013: 263.
3. Brennan 2016a: 2.
4. Kaplan 2013.

participants were given numerical data about the effectiveness of a skin cream for treating a rash.[5] Arriving at the correct answer about the skin cream's effectiveness required some mathematical ability. Predictably, people who were better at math were more likely to get the correct answer. This is not surprising. What *is* surprising is what happened when people were given a politicized version of the same problem. When the exact same numbers were presented as pertaining to the effectiveness of gun control laws in decreasing crime, people's general math aptitude was no longer the best predictor of whether they would answer correctly. Instead, liberals tended to solve the problem correctly when the numbers indicated that gun laws were effective (a common view amongst liberals), but they tended to answer incorrectly when the numbers showed the opposite. The performance of conservatives was a mirror image: they did well when the numbers supported their prior beliefs and poorly when they didn't.[6]

In a separate study, Kahan tested people's scientific literacy alongside their political ideology. When asked about the risks of climate change, those who were *more* scientifically literate were also more skeptical of climate change when admitting such threats conflicted with their party line. Scientific literacy did not help them reason their way to the right answer. On the contrary, it made it easier for them to reason their way to the conclusion they wanted. Other experiments have found similar results.[7] In general, people use their sophisticated reasoning skills to wriggle their way out of evidence that disconfirms their political convictions.

This chapter examines how politics can interfere with our ability to think clearly. It starts by outlining how political biases can affect our thinking, especially in those who are more knowledgeable. Although we often perceive these cognitive biases as irrational, we'll consider whether they might actually be rational. Just as humans can be *rationally ignorant* (as discussed in the previous chapter), they can also be *rationally irrational*. On this view, forming irrational beliefs can help us fulfill our desires for social belonging, identity, or psychological comfort at a low cost. Alternatively, voters might genuinely prioritize truth and evidence, with partisan bias merely reflecting differences in the information available to them or the degree of trust they place in sources. After exploring these ideas, we'll assess whether conservatives and liberals are equally prone to bias or whether one group is more susceptible. The chapter concludes by discussing the potential hazards of labeling others as irrational in political discourse.

5. Kahan, Peters, Dawson, et al. 2017.
6. See Stagnaro et al. 2023 for doubts about the robustness of this finding.
7. Kahan 2013; Kahan, Peters, Wittlin, et al. 2012.

1. Politically Motivated Reasoning

On the afternoon of Saturday, November 23, 1951, the Princeton football team faced Dartmouth in their last game of the season. It was a rough and dirty match, with numerous violations ranging from minor to blatant. In the second quarter, Princeton's star player left the game with a broken nose, and in the third quarter, a Dartmouth player was carried off the field with a broken leg. The event was especially important because Princeton was undefeated and their star player—who had just appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine—was playing his final game.

Immediately after the game, accusations began to fly. Which team started the rough play? Did one side play more cleanly and fairly than the other? Who committed the most infractions, and were these violations minor or blatant?

A few weeks after the game, students from Princeton and Dartmouth were asked to watch a video of the game and explain what they saw. The results were remarkable. Princeton students saw the Dartmouth team make over twice as many infractions as were seen by the Dartmouth students, while Dartmouth students saw the Princeton team commit far more flagrant violations than were witnessed by the Princeton students. In short, they were seeing entirely different games. Their perceptions of reality were shaped by team loyalty.[8]

Politics is a lot like sports. When a group of Americans watched a video of a political demonstration to determine whether the protesters were engaged in unlawful conduct, they couldn't agree on what they'd seen. The viewers had to decide whether the protesters were engaging in constitutionally protected "speech" or unlawful "conduct" by obstructing, threatening, or intimidating members of the public. Half of the viewers were told the demonstrators were protesting legalized abortion outside of an abortion clinic, while the other half were told that the demonstrators were protesting the military's "Don't ask, don't tell" policy outside a military recruitment center. People with different values disagreed sharply not only over their assessments of the protests but also about key "facts," such as whether the protesters obstructed and threatened pedestrians.[9] All participants viewed the same video, but what they *saw* depended on their values.

In both politics and sports, people interpret information in highly biased ways. For this reason, voters have been likened to sports hooligans.[10] A "political hooligan" is essentially an ardent fan of politics. They have a strong commitment to their political identity and take pride in their team membership while expressing strong disapproval towards dissenters. Their political views are integral to their identity, and it's important for their self-image to belong to a political group, such as the Democrats,

8. Hastorf and Cantril 1954.
9. Kahan, Hoffman, et al. 2012.
10. Brennan 2016a.

Republicans, Labour, or Tories. Consequently, they tend to interpret political information in a way that nurtures and preserves their political identity. They are guided by the social group they want to fit into, the self-image they want to maintain, and the desire to avoid admitting mistakes.

When information is evaluated through the lens of partisan commitment, it often distorts judgment. Political identity can lead citizens to evaluate the exact same information in different ways, depending on whether it supports their antecedent political views. This phenomenon is known as *partisan bias*. In broad strokes, partisan bias is characterized by the "general tendency for people to think or act in ways that unwittingly favor their own political group or cast their own ideologically based beliefs in a favorable light."[11]

Partisan bias can take various forms and emerge at different stages of information processing. For example, we may selectively *expose* ourselves to evidence that confirms our existing political beliefs and *avoid* information that contradicts them.[12] This behavior is often referred to as *selective exposure*.[13] We might also selectively *remember* and *evaluate* information, uncritically accepting data that supports our views while being overly critical or forgetful of counter-evidence.[14] This overall tendency to seek, selectively recall, and favorably interpret information that confirms our beliefs while avoiding, discarding, or dismissing contrary evidence is known as *confirmation bias*.[15] When this occurs, two people can look at the exact same body of evidence and yet walk away with radically different conclusions about what the evidence shows.

These biases are sometimes collectively referred to as *motivated reasoning*. We reason in a motivated way when we gather and process factual information in a manner congenial to our values and desires. A large body of work in cognitive psychology suggests that we often interpret and filter evidence in ways that fit with our antecedent worldview. We "seek out, interpret, evaluate, and weigh evidence and arguments in ways that are systematically biased toward conclusions that we 'want' to reach for reasons independent of their truth or warrant."[16] This is especially true in politics, where our reasoning is more prone to error and bias because it touches on beliefs that matter deeply to us. Our political, moral, and religious convictions are often central to our identity.[17] We can therefore classify these as *identity-constitutive beliefs*. These beliefs reflect one's conception of "who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others."[18]

Astute observers of human nature anticipated these psychological findings. In

11. Ditto, Liu, et al. 2019: 274.
12. Iyengar and Hahn 2009.
13. Sears and Freedman 1967.
14. Lord et al. 1979; Taber and Lodge 2006.
15. Nickerson 1998.
16. Ancell 2019: 418; also Kunda 1990.
17. Haidt 2012.
18. Hogg and Abrams 1988.

1620, Francis Bacon wrote, "The human understanding when it has once adopted an opinion (either as being the received opinion or as being agreeable in itself) draws all things else to support and agree with it."[19] In 1928, Bertrand Russell declared, "It is a law of our being that, whenever it is in any way possible, we adopt beliefs as will preserve our self-respect."[20] More than 200 years before Russell, John Locke remarked on the deplorable state of the human mind in *Of the Conduct of the Understanding*:

> There are several weaknesses and defects in the understanding, either from the natural temper of the mind or ill habits taken up, which hinder it in its progress to knowledge. Of these there are as many possibly to be found, if the mind were thoroughly studied, as there are diseases of the body, each whereof clogs and disables the understanding to some degree, and therefore deserves to be looked at and cured.[21]

Although Locke was keenly aware of our intellectual imperfections, he was optimistic about our ability to overcome them. He prescribed that we impartially self-examine our own beliefs to root out "the prejudices imbibed from education, party, reverence, fashion, interest."[22] In other words, he believed that rigorous self-study would help to expose our biases.

Locke was overly optimistic. Self-judgment is often clouded by rationalization and prejudice. It not only leaves bad reasoning undetected but also makes us unduly confident that we've ruled it out. As Nathan Ballantyne writes, "The feeling that we've done our best to be unbiased will encourage us to think we are unbiased, but that feeling should not be trusted."[23] It should not be trusted because biases normally leave no trace in consciousness. From the inside, biased judgments seem just like unbiased ones. As Timothy Wilson and Nancy Brekke quip, "Human judgments—even very bad ones—do not smell."[24] Thus, we typically can't figure out whether we are biased by merely gazing into our own minds. We suffer from what psychologists call *the illusion of objectivity*: we think we're more objective and less biased than we really are.[25]

It should therefore come as no surprise that in studies on partisan bias, participants are unaware that they were reasoning in biased ways. Take, for instance, Geoffrey Cohen's famous work on how party identification influences policy preferences.[26] He ran a study in which participants were told about two welfare programs: a harsh (i.e., stingy) welfare program and a lavish (i.e., generous) one. As you might expect,

19. Bacon [1620] 1939: 35.
20. Russell [1928] 2004: 51.
21. Locke [1706] 1996: §12.
22. Locke [1706] 1996: §10.
23. Ballantyne 2019b: 131–2.
24. Wilson and Brekke 1994: 121.
25. Kunda 1990.
26. Cohen 2003.

the Democrats tended to favor the generous welfare program, while the Republicans tended to favor the stingy one. But here's the rub: when Democrats were told that their party supported the harsh policy, they approved of it. Likewise, when Republicans were told that their party supported the lavish policy, they approved of that instead. It made little difference what the actual content of the policy was; all that mattered was which party was said to support the program. Even worse, participants were completely unaware of partisan influence. When asked to justify their policy preference, the participants claimed they were responding to its objective merits and insisted that party affiliations were irrelevant. This illustrates the power of motivated reasoning as well as our blindness to it.

2. Knowledge and Bias

We all engage in motivated reasoning, but is motivated reasoning tied to ignorance? You might think that politically motivated reasoning arises from ignorance or that a lack of intellectual sophistication fosters biased thinking. However, the opposite tends to be true. Often, those who are most knowledgeable and reflective display the highest levels of bias when evaluating political information.

In general, highly partisan individuals tend to be the most knowledgeable about politics.[27] For instance, strong supporters of the Republican or Democratic parties often know more about politics than those with weaker political affiliations. This fact alone is not very surprising. The more we care about something, the more inclined we are to learn about it. Coffee lovers tend to know more about coffee; motorbike enthusiasts know more about motorbikes; and the biggest sports fans often acquire extensive knowledge of their favorite teams. Politics is no different. The biggest political "fans" tend to consume the most information about politics.[28] This explains why those with strong partisan allegiances are often the most politically knowledgeable.

But the most politically partisan individuals (who are also the most knowledgeable) are *also* the most likely to have their thinking corrupted by politics.[29] Party identification operates as a kind of "perceptual screen" through which we filter information.[30] The more you identify with a political party, the less able you are to objectively evaluate information. Unsurprisingly, political bias is typically strongest amongst the most partisan individuals.[31]

27. Converse 1964; Hannon 2022a.
28. Somin 2016: 93.
29. Lavine et al. 2012.
30. Campbell et al. 1960: 133.
31. Lavine et al. 2012.

Further Resources

Achen, Christopher H., and Larry M. Bartels (2016). *Democracy for Realists*. Princeton University Press.

Brennan, Jason (2016). *Against Democracy*. Princeton University Press.

Friedman, Jeffrey (2019). "Is Political Irrationality a Myth?" In *The Routledge Handbook of Political Epistemology*. Routledge.

Haidt, Jonathan (2012). *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided By Politics and Religion*. New York: Pantheon.

Hannon, Michael (2022). "Are Knowledgeable Voters Better Voters?" *Politics, Philosophy & Economics*, 21(1), pp. 29–54.

Huemer, Michael (2016). "Why People Are Irrational About Politics." In Jonathan Anomaly et al. (eds.), *Philosophy, Politics, and Economics: An Anthology*. Oxford University Press, pp. 456–467.

Krause, Sharon (2008). *Civil Passions: Moral Sentiment and Democratic Deliberation*. Princeton University Press.

Stanovich, Keith E. (2021). *The Bias That Divides Us: The Science and Politics of Myside Thinking*. MIT Press.

Williams, Dan (2023). "The Case for Partisan Motivated Reasoning." *Synthese*, 202(3).

Chapter 6

Political Belief

Dick Cheney: "What do we, uh, believe?"
Donald Rumsfeld: "What do we believe? Good one, Cheney! Good one!"
— *Vice* (screenplay)

Introduction

Imagine a society where people enjoy spending their leisure time reading newspapers, magazines, and books, consuming news from TV and the internet, debating political issues in various forums, considering arguments and evidence for certain policies and candidates, and then forming and updating their political beliefs based on the available evidence. This is an inspiring vision of democracy. It presupposes that voters seek out reliable information, form their political opinions based on this information, evaluate where candidates stand on issues, and then choose to support the candidate or political party that best aligns with their preferences and values.

Let's call this a "belief-first model" of political behavior.[1] This model assumes a voter psychology that is cognitive and epistemically rational. On this theory, voters are reasonably informed about political issues, candidates, and policies, and they cast their votes based on a rational evaluation of this information, consistent with their personal interests and values. Political beliefs, in turn, serve as the foundation for political actions, including voting, activism, and other forms of political engagement. This account of political belief fits with the broader common sense view that beliefs and desires together cause and explain behavior. It has been dubbed the "folk theory of democracy."[2]

This intuitive picture relies on at least four assumptions: first, that our political beliefs aim at truth; second, that many citizens have stable and meaningful political

1. Cf. Simler and Hanson 2017: 264.
2. Achen and Bartels 2016.

beliefs; third, that citizens choose to support political candidates or parties on the basis of these beliefs; fourth, that democratic governments are responsive to the electorate's meaningful political beliefs and preferences. All four of these assumptions are contestable.

Indeed, many political "beliefs" lack the hallmarks philosophers typically ascribe to, or deem requisite for, belief. First, while ordinary beliefs typically aim at truth, our political opinions often do not (see Chapter 5). Rather, they are often socially adaptive cognitive states that serve non-epistemic functions. Second, many political beliefs, as reflected in public opinion polls, are not deeply held. They are unstable and tend to fluctuate randomly, which can lead to a highly distorted view of what voters "believe." Third, some political "beliefs" are so evidence-resistant that they seem more like dogmatic convictions than genuine beliefs. Finally, while it's commonly thought that beliefs and desires motivate actions, in politics, actions are often driven by identity. Citizens frequently *claim* to hold and be influenced by particular beliefs, but their actions often contradict this.

In this chapter, we explore the nature, function, and normative significance of political beliefs. We argue that political beliefs often differ from ordinary beliefs because they do not aim at truth. Drawing on empirical evidence from political science and psychology, we also suggest that many individuals lack consistent and meaningful political beliefs. Furthermore, we propose that group identity, rather than individual political beliefs, is often the true psychological basis for voting behavior. Along the way, we reflect on what this means for democratic theory. These insights about the nature and purpose of political beliefs raise important normative questions about the significance of political beliefs in a democracy. We may need to radically re-envision democratic politics in order to accommodate these new concerns about the nature and function of political beliefs.

We interpret the term "political beliefs" quite broadly. Political beliefs encompass ideas and values about how society should be governed and organized, including the role of public institutions. They also include specific opinions on laws, regulations, and public policies, as well as attitudes about the role and scope of government authority. More broadly, political beliefs involve normative beliefs about the right course for politics, ranging from overarching beliefs about an ideal society to more detailed beliefs about specific policies to be implemented. Finally, we include beliefs about politicized issues, such as climate change or the claim that Barack Obama was not born in the US. These function as political signals despite not being explicitly *about* politics.

1. Do Political Beliefs Aim at Truth?

To survive and flourish, we need true beliefs. To stay alive, we must truly believe that our bodies need water; to avoid illness and death, we must figure out which foods are poisonous; to avoid being fired, we must have true beliefs about our job performance. If we were insensitive to important truths, human life would be frustrating, unpleasant, and short. Indeed, it would probably have ended long ago. As W. V. O. Quine once said, "Creatures inveterately wrong in their inductions have a pathetic but praiseworthy tendency to die before reproducing their kind."[3]

In philosophical discussions, it's commonly held that beliefs "aim at truth."[4] Precisely how to interpret this claim is debated. One understanding invokes a *teleological* conception of belief. On this view, the functional goal of cognitive systems is the formation and maintenance of true beliefs. Thus, an attitude counts as a belief if it's formed and regulated by cognitive processes that are truth-conducive. In this functional sense, beliefs aim at truth. By contrast, some prefer to understand the "aim of truth" as a normative thesis. On this interpretation, beliefs are governed by a *norm* of truth: a belief is *correct* if and only if it is true.

No matter how we interpret this aim, many considerations indicate that beliefs are deeply connected to truth. First, it is a truism that to believe something is to believe that it is true. It's absurd to claim to believe that p yet regard p as false. Once we regard something as false, we stop believing it. Second, forming beliefs in the image of truth is not up to us. We cannot believe or disbelieve directly at will. No matter how convenient forming false beliefs might be, we cannot simply bring ourselves to adopt and drop beliefs when convenient.[5] Third, false beliefs seem defective and sometimes criticizable. For example, forming your beliefs in the absence of good evidence is problematic precisely because evidence increases the probability of truth.

Yet many beliefs do *not* seem to aim at truth. Our focus is on political beliefs, but similar points could be made about moral, religious, and other identity-constitutive beliefs. In all these cases, humans tend to evaluate evidence and form beliefs in non-truth-conducive ways. As discussed in the previous chapter, it's common for people to seek out, uncritically accept, and better recall evidence that is favorable to their view. They also tend to avoid, reject, and forget evidence that contradicts their views.[6] Moreover, people generally discuss their political beliefs with others who share similar roles and choose to receive political information through like-minded media.[7] This method is arbitrary with respect to the truth. Insofar as believing in accordance with one's social group is truth-conducive, one simply gets lucky. In political contexts, people

3. Quine 1969: 126.
4. Shah 2003; Williams 1973.
5. Williams 1973.
6. Lord et al. 1979.
7. Mutz 2006.

also misinterpret simple data that they easily interpret correctly in other contexts.[8]

This behavior conflicts with the notion that our beliefs strive for truth. Humans frequently engage in motivated reasoning, identity-protective cognition, and confabulation. We fall prey to various positive illusions that make us feel better about our own lives, often at the cost of truth. Now, this is not to deny that beliefs formed through biased and unreliable processes still *seem* true to us from the inside. However, from an external viewpoint, it's difficult to maintain that such beliefs aim at truth.

2. Are Political Beliefs Socially Adaptive?

If true beliefs are so important in some contexts, why not in others? A plausible explanation is that *false beliefs are sometimes adaptive*.[9] They can provide us with psychological comfort, foster group loyalty and belonging, and serve a variety of other ends unrelated to truth.

We suggest that a primary function of political beliefs is *social bonding*.[10] A wealth of evidence indicates that people tend to conform their beliefs and attitudes to those around them, especially when they perceive others as similar to themselves.[11] In the political realm, individuals often adopt beliefs that align with those of the groups they wish to associate with, thus satisfying emotionally charged group loyalties. When information threatens our sense of self or our social identity, our "psychological immune system" is programmed to adjust our beliefs to ward off such threats.[12] This often requires avoiding harsh truths and believing pleasant falsehoods.

According to Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels, the true psychological basis for voting behavior lies not in independent judgments, but in group identity. They write,

> Voters choose political parties, first and foremost, in order to align themselves with the appropriate coalition of social groups. Most citizens support a party not because they have carefully calculated that its policy positions are closest to their own, but rather because 'their kind' of person belongs to that party.[13]

In short, people adopt whatever "beliefs" best align with those of their social group.

8. Kahan, Peters, Dawson, et al. 2017.
9. Williams 2021b.
10. Graham and Haidt 2010.
11. Cialdini 1993.
12. Mandelbaum 2019.
13. Achen and Bartels 2016: 307.

2.1 Socially Adaptive Beliefs

These observations may lead us to distinguish between two categories of belief: *ordinary world-modeling beliefs* and *socially adaptive beliefs*.[14] The functional properties of these two types of belief appear distinct enough to treat them as different cognitive attitudes. Whereas ordinary world-modeling beliefs aim at truth, socially adaptive beliefs aim at social-psychological goods. For both types of belief, the mechanisms for belief production can be said to be functioning *properly*—that is, doing what ancestral tokens of that type were selected for doing. For instance, consider someone who falsely believes that Hillary Clinton gave classified information to Russia in exchange for donations. This might not be a processing error within their belief system but rather the system functioning as intended. This is because the *point* of such beliefs is not necessarily to be true, but to be socially adaptive.

This distinction helps shed light on the nature of political beliefs. Generally, deeply held political beliefs appear to be unresponsive to evidence, driven by emotion, and based on largely non-evidential grounds.[15] As such, political beliefs (and other identity-constitutive beliefs) seem to be a different cognitive attitude than many regular beliefs that model the world. In politics, we often care more about belonging and team loyalty than truth because, for many, politics is not really about truth. It is far more important for our everyday beliefs to be true than it is for our political beliefs.

That last point might sound counterintuitive. Political beliefs, such as views about what justice requires, are often considered very important; by contrast, many everyday beliefs are mundane, like the belief that my keys are on the table. However, Paul Bloom nicely illustrates the importance of having accurate everyday beliefs over political beliefs:

> If I have the wrong theory of how to make scrambled eggs, they will come out too dry; if I have the wrong everyday morality, I will hurt those I love. But suppose I think that the leader of the opposing party has sex with pigs, or has thoroughly botched the arms deal with Iran. Unless I'm a member of a tiny powerful community, my beliefs have no effect on the world. This is certainly true as well for my views about the flat tax, global warming, and evolution. They don't have to be grounded in truth, because the truth value doesn't have any effect on my life. . . To complain that someone's views on global warming aren't grounded in the fact, then, is to miss the point.[16]

When a false belief provides us with social benefits and comes with almost zero practical costs, our cognitive processing seems geared toward promoting and sustaining such beliefs. This also explains why it's often so difficult to correct false beliefs. If a

14. Williams 2021a.
15. Achen and Bartels 2016.
16. Bloom 2016: 236–37.

Further Resources

Flores, Carolina (forthcoming). "Resistant Beliefs, Responsive Believers." *Journal of Philosophy*.

Funkhouser, Eric (2022). "A Tribal Mind: Beliefs That Signal Group Identity or Commitment." *Mind and Language*, 37(3), pp. 444–464.

Green, Donald P., Bradley Palmquist, et al. (2002). *Partisan Hearts and Minds: Political Parties and the Social Identities of Voters*. Yale University Press.

Hannon, Michael (2021). "Disagreement or Badmouthing? The Role of Expressive Discourse in Politics." In Elizabeth Edenberg and Michael Hannon (eds.), *Political Epistemology*. Oxford University Press.

Huddy, Leonie (2001). "From Social to Political Identity: A Critical Examination of Social Identity Theory." *Political Psychology*, 22(1), pp. 127–156.

Kinder, Donald R., and Nathan P. Kalmoe (2017). *Neither Liberal Nor Conservative: Ideological Innocence in the American Public*. University of Chicago Press.

Traldi, Oliver (2024). *Political Beliefs: A Philosophical Introduction*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Williams, Dan (2021). "Socially Adaptive Belief." *Mind & Language*, 36(3), pp. 333–354.

Chapter 7

Political Disagreement

> Democracy requires accepting that conflict and division are inherent to politics and that there is no place where reconciliation could be definitively achieved as the full actualization of the unity of "the people."
>
> — Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*

Introduction

Does affirmative action amount to reverse racism? Would gun ownership increase personal safety? Does the death penalty deter murder? Will climate change be catastrophic if we don't take immediate action? Should hate speech be outlawed?

These questions, along with many others, spark intense disagreement. Political opponents cannot agree on matters concerning the economy, foreign affairs, education, energy, health care, the environment, privatization, abortion, immigration, and much else. In the United States, nearly half of all Republicans and Democrats say they "almost never" agree with the other party's positions.[1] And it's not just ordinary citizens who disagree, but experts and politicians, too. When it comes to politics, there is no end to the number of issues over which people disagree.

Disagreement is a ubiquitous feature of politics, but is that a bad thing? According to Jean Jacques Rousseau, widespread disagreement is evidence that the state is in decline. Rousseau claims that extensive disagreement is a symptom of citizens' lack of commitment to the common good, and that we should aspire to solve the problem of disagreement.[2] Others deny this. John Rawls argues that disagreement is inevitable in any free society. In a pluralistic society, we should anticipate differing values and preferences. Reasonable citizens will recognize that people of goodwill can hold divergent views on moral and political issues.[3] For Rawls, political disagreement is symptomatic

1. Pew Research Center 2016.
2. Rousseau 1762 [1968]: Book IV, Chapter II.
3. Rawls 1993.

of a free, pluralistic, tolerant, healthy democracy. If he is right, then we should neither expect nor strive to resolve many political disagreements, at least when they concern reasonable but incompatible perspectives.

What about disagreement over empirical, factual issues? These may pose a unique challenge for democratic deliberation. While disagreements about values are expected in politics, factual disagreements may be particularly troubling.[4] This is because they undermine the shared epistemic foundation necessary for reasoned debate, compromise, and effective governance. Without agreement on basic facts, our ability to hold meaningful discussions and reach collective decisions is jeopardized.

Consider, for example, the debate around election security and voter fraud. Questions about the prevalence of voter fraud, the integrity of voting systems, and the accuracy of election outcomes are empirical issues that should be resolved through evidence and transparent processes. Yet, when partisan divisions lead to competing "facts" about such issues, it erodes trust in democratic institutions and can destabilize the electoral process itself. When factual disagreements become politicized, they not only hinder evidence-based decision-making but also impede accountability: if constituents can't agree on what's true, they cannot uniformly hold elected officials accountable for their actions or policies.

This chapter will examine the nature, causes, significance, and epistemology of political disagreement. We attempt to answer questions such as: What is a disagreement? Do political disagreements differ from other types of disagreement? What is the rational response to persistent political disagreement with other citizens? Are political disagreements rationally resolvable? We will argue that political disagreements have unique features that make them particularly intractable. Yet, even if political disagreements are often difficult to resolve rationally, deliberation and contestation may still be morally, politically, and epistemically valuable.

1. Varieties of Disagreement

When we describe two people as disagreeing, we sometimes mean that *they are having a disagreement*. Here, they are engaging in a kind of *activity*. Whether two people are having a disagreement depends on their attitudes and actions toward each other.

However, it's also possible for two people to disagree *without having a disagreement*. This might sound puzzling at first, but two people can disagree simply by holding *incompatible beliefs*. In this sense, disagreement is not an activity but rather a *state*.[5] For example, I've never *had a disagreement* with Plato, but I still *disagree with him* about many things (e.g., he believed in the theory of forms, but I don't). When disagreement is characterized as incompatible beliefs, it's entirely possible for two people to disagree

4. Sinnott-Armstrong 2018: 18–20.
5. Cappelen and Hawthorne 2009: 60–1.

without ever exchanging words. In fact, they can disagree without knowing each other, without noticing the disagreement, and even when both are long dead.

Just as two people can *disagree* without *having a disagreement*, it's also possible for two people to *have a disagreement* without actually *disagreeing*. Philosophical disputes are sometimes like this.[6] Two people can agree (in the state sense) about all the pertinent issues but nevertheless continue to disagree (in the activity sense) because a misunderstanding leads them to mistakenly think their views are incompatible. For example, you and I might have mutually compatible beliefs about whether hate speech should be outlawed but criticize each other because we fail to recognize this compatibility. Perhaps we mean different things by "hate speech." If so, then our dispute is *merely verbal*. We agree on all the facts, but linguistic differences lead us to *think* we disagree.

To fix terminology, let's say that two people are engaged in a *dispute* when they actively have a disagreement, but they *disagree* when they have conflicting beliefs. Since we must take ourselves to disagree in order to have a dispute, the former notion is more fundamental. While some political "disagreements" are really just disputes, our primary focus here will be on cases where two or more people have conflicting beliefs.

The epistemology of disagreement is a complex subject with a variety of interesting cases. Suppose one person believes some proposition p and another denies p, yet neither is making a mistake. These are *faultless disagreements*.[7] Most people think there can be faultless disagreements on matters of taste. What one person finds funny, delicious, or beautiful is not always what another finds funny, delicious, or beautiful. When Michael says that Picasso's *The Weeping Woman* is a beautiful painting and Elise disagrees with him, it's possible that neither is making any error. We must distinguish between disagreements about objective matters of fact and disagreements about non-objective matters of opinion. In this chapter, our focus is on disagreements where there *is* a fact of the matter, or at least where the participants reasonably *believe* there is one.

Individuals can also have different levels of *confidence* regarding a proposition. For example, while two people may agree that climate change is occurring, one might be much more confident than the other. Although it may sometimes be useful to classify these as "disagreements," we find this usage somewhat artificial. We will focus on cases where people take different "coarse-grained" attitudes toward a claim, namely, *belief* that p and *disbelief* that p (i.e., believing that p is false). We'll say that two people "disagree" when the following conditions are met:

(i) one person believes that p and the other person disbelieves that p;

6. Ballantyne 2016; Chalmers 2011; Jenkins 2014.
7. Kolbel 2004.

(ii) there is a fact of the matter as to whether *p*, or the participants reasonably believe there is such a fact.

While this definition is straightforward, it's often difficult to tell precisely when people genuinely disagree. In some cases, it might be unclear whether an individual *really believes* some proposition *p* or is merely *asserting p without belief*. For instance, approximately one in seven Americans will *assert* that Barack Obama is "the antichrist."[8] Do these people really believe this? Maybe some do. But another interpretation, discussed in the previous chapter, is that such reports often reflect *partisan cheerleading* rather than genuine *belief*. It's a way of saying "Boo, Democrats!" and "Go, Republicans!" Alternatively, these assertions might be better understood as *political credences* (see Chapter 6). This makes it difficult to determine whether condition (i) is satisfied. Such cases may involve disputes, but not necessarily genuine disagreements.

Additionally, it is controversial whether there are objective facts in domains of discourse like morality, aesthetics, and some areas of politics (see Chapter 1). According to moral anti-realists, there are no objective moral values or normative facts. They claim that ethical statements, such as "Abortion is wrong," are not factual claims that are objectively true or false. Instead, these statements are subjective claims (ethical subjectivism), not genuine claims at all (non-cognitivism), or mistaken objective claims (moral nihilism). By contrast, moral relativists deny that there is just one right answer to a moral question. They say that one proposition is "true for" one person or group, while a different and incompatible proposition is "true for" others.

While relativists appear more tolerant and respectful of diverse perspectives, they shy away from acknowledging the existence of genuine disagreements. They also fail to engage with the arguments of others. As Richard Feldman writes,

> Since their own view is "true for them," relativists do not see their own positions as challenged by the views of others. Therefore, they need not examine the arguments for those dissenting views with care. It is as if they responded to arguments on the other side of an issue by saying, "Well, that argument may be a good one for you, but I have my own view, and I will stick to it since it is true for me." In a way, this response is almost dismissive, but it is coupled with a difficult-to-interpret assertion that the other view is right also.[9]

We will not attempt to adjudicate the rich and tangled debate between realists, anti-realists, and relativists.[10] As mentioned above, we'll assume that *either* political disagreements involve some fact of the matter *or* the participants reasonably believe there is such a fact. In other words, we focus on cases where people *take themselves* to disagree over the truth of a claim. This allows us to sidestep thorny metaethical issues.

8. Harris 2013.
9. Feldman 2007: 198.
10. See Sinclair 2020 for an overview.

2. Features of Political Disagreement

Is there anything distinctive about political disagreements? Do they differ from other kinds of disagreements, and if so, how? We will highlight five key features of political disagreement in contemporary liberal democracies.[11]

1. **They are very widespread.** As Aaron Ancell notes, "There is no country on Earth in which people do not disagree about how their society ought to be run, who ought to rule, what the laws ought to be, and much else that falls within the domain of politics."[12] Political disagreements are common within any given society and not restricted to just a few people disagreeing.

2. **They are expansive.** Political disagreements span across a diverse range of issues, such as abortion, gun control, climate change, vaccine safety, affirmative action, campaign finance, tax rates, and foreign military intervention, to name just a few. They also stretch across moral and non-moral issues and occur at varying levels of abstraction, from general moral principles to the specifics of policy implementation.

3. **They are persistent.** Disagreement seems to be a permanent feature of politics. As Chantal Mouffe says, we must "relinquish the illusion" that political disagreements will ever fully disappear.[13] Moreover, it's extremely difficult to resolve political disagreements, even after several hours of argumentation. The exchange of arguments and evidence often does little to get people to change their minds.

4. **They are clustered.** As Michael Huemer observes, "You can often predict someone's belief about one issue on the basis of his opinion about some other completely unrelated issue. For example, people who support gun control are much more likely to support welfare programs and abortion rights."[14] This is especially true in the United States, where people's views about diverse political issues are strongly correlated.[15]

5. **They are antagonistic.** Political disagreements have become increasingly hostile. Instead of viewing their opponents as people of goodwill who simply disagree on moral and political issues, many voters now see their adversaries as stupid, immoral, and even dangerous to the nation.[16] Political opponents tend to dislike

11. We adopt these features of political disagreement from Huemer 2016 and Ancell 2017.
12. Ancell 2017: 24.
13. Mouffe 2000: 11.
14. Huemer 2016: 458.
15. See Chapter 8 for further discussion of clustering.
16. Pew Research Center 2014.

Further Resources

Feldman, Richard (2007). "Reasonable Religious Disagreements." In Louise Antony (ed.), *Philosophers Without Gods: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular Life*. Oxford University Press, pp. 194–214.

Gutmann, Amy, and Dennis F. Thompson (1996). *Democracy and Disagreement*. Harvard University Press.

Hannon, Michael (2025). "Disagreement and Contemporary Political Philosophy." In Maria Baghramian, J. Adam Carter, & Rach Cosker-Rowland (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Disagreement*. Routledge.

Johnson, Casey Rebecca (ed.) (2018). *Voicing Dissent: The Ethics and Epistemology of Making Disagreement Public*. New York: Routledge.

Kornblith, Hilary (2010). "Belief in the Face of Controversy." In Richard Feldman & Ted A. Warfield (eds.), *Disagreement*. Oxford University Press.

Lackey, Jennifer (2019). "When Should We Disagree about Politics?" In Elizabeth Edenberg and Michael Hannon (eds.), *Political Epistemology*. Oxford University Press.

Mason, Lilliana (2018). *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. University of Chicago Press.

Mill, J. S. ([1859] 2001). "Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion." In *On Liberty*. Batoche Books.

Rawls, John (1993). *Political Liberalism*. Columbia University Press.

Sunstein, Cass (2017). *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*. Princeton University Press.

Talisse, Robert B. (2009). *Democracy and Moral Conflict*. Cambridge University Press.

Chapter 8

Polarization & Partisanship

> If a man's heart is rankling with discord and ill feeling toward you, you can't win him to your way of thinking with all the logic in Christendom.
>
> — Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*

Introduction

In *Federalist Papers No. 10*, James Madison warns against the "violence of faction." One of the greatest dangers to democracy, he says, is not external threats but rather internal ones arising from violent divisions within a society. Democracy is endangered when both citizens and politicians divide into rigidly opposed camps, refusing to compromise or cede power to their adversaries. Today, we face a similar threat. It goes by the name "polarization."

Polarization is widely seen as one of the central threats to democracy. A 2022 poll revealed that 30% of Americans consider political polarization as one of the top issues facing the country.[1] Yet, the problem is far from unique to the United States. Comparative studies have shown that polarization is on the rise in many democracies worldwide.[2] As a result, political polarization has become a major concern among scholars, policymakers, and citizens alike.

The term "polarization" is frequently invoked, but its meaning is often unclear. It has been applied to a variety of phenomena, ranging from the widening ideological gap between political leaders to the erosion of civil discourse in public spaces. In many ways, "polarization" has become a catch-all term for the social, psychological, and cultural factors that contribute to the fragmentation of political consensus. While research into polarization is one of the most influential areas of contemporary political scholarship, there is considerable debate regarding its nature, causes, and impacts.

1. Skelley and Fuong 2022.
2. Boxell et al. 2022; Carothers and O'Donohue 2019.

In this chapter, we try to untangle the intricate threads of political polarization, aiming to understand its origins, drivers, and consequences. First, we identify several different yet interrelated conceptions of polarization. Second, we enumerate factors that contribute to polarization, including media diets, political leaders, and broader social and psychological forces. Third, we examine whether polarization is epistemically rational, finding that certain forms are more rational than others. Fourth, we confront the potential consequences of polarization, such as political violence and eroding trust in democratic institutions. Finally, we question whether polarization is as significant an issue as often presumed.

1. What Is Polarization?

What do we mean by "polarization" in politics? Essentially, polarization concerns the widening gaps in political attitudes and identities between individuals and groups. These gaps result in profound societal divisions and hostility. However, polarization is not a univocal phenomenon; it has many dimensions.

First, polarization can occur either *within a group* of like-minded individuals or *between groups* with opposing perspectives. These are known as *intragroup* versus *intergroup polarization*, respectively. Second, it can describe a *static property* or a *process*.[3] The former refers to the distance between individuals or groups at a specific point in time; the latter represents an ongoing, dynamic phenomenon that evolves over time. Third, polarization can occur in the population *as a whole* or specifically among *political elites*, a distinction between *mass* versus *elite* polarization.

Most experts agree that political leaders in America have become more ideologically polarized. For example, there are very few moderate members in the US Congress. However, there is less agreement about whether the electorate is ideologically polarized.[4] Despite this, scholars overwhelmingly agree that American voters are highly polarized in terms of their *feelings* towards one another.[5] Hence, we can also distinguish between *ideological* and *affective* polarization.

Polarization is a complex phenomenon that can't be simplified without misrepresentation. Distinguishing between different types of polarization is crucial for several reasons. First, it allows us to better understand the complexity of this multifaceted concept, including the various dimensions along which individuals or groups can polarize, as well as the interconnections between them. Second, it helps us better understand the causes and consequences of different types of polarization. For instance, we can examine whether individuals or the media are partly responsible. Lastly, recognizing these differences helps identify which types of polarization are especially

3. DiMaggio et al. 1996.
4. McCarty 2019; McCarty et al. 2016.
5. Iyengar, Sood, et al. 2012; Mason 2018.

harmful and formulate effective strategies to mitigate their adverse effects.

1.1 Ideological Polarization

Political polarization is conventionally viewed in terms of *issue positions*. When large sections of the population consistently hold diverging views on specific policy issues, this is referred to as "issue polarization." Consider:

> **Environmental Regulation**. In 1994, 39% of Republicans and 29% of Democrats agreed that "stricter environmental laws and regulations cost too many jobs and hurt the economy." In 2014, the partisan gap on this issue more than tripled: 59% of Republicans and 24% of Democrats agreed with the same statement.[6] (The gap increased from 10% to 35%.)

While issue polarization concentrates on particular topics or policy areas, such as gun control, abortion, or environmental regulation, it typically takes place in the broader context of *ideological polarization*.

Ideological polarization occurs when the distance between party platforms and ideology increases. "Ideology" here denotes a set of beliefs, values, principles, and ideas that guide one's understanding of politics. Political ideologies include liberalism, conservatism, socialism, and anarchism. An ideology serves as a comprehensive framework through which people interpret and analyze political issues, formulate policy positions, and make decisions about governance and societal organization. (Note that "ideology" is sometimes used to describe belief systems that perpetuate oppression; however, our focus is on its neutral, non-pejorative sense.) Unlike issue polarization, ideological polarization implies a more consistent and overarching set of political beliefs that inform positions on various issues. That said, people can be polarized on specific issues without necessarily being ideologically polarized.

The Pew Research Center found that from 2004 to 2014, the percentage of Americans with consistently conservative or consistently liberal opinions doubled.[7] This suggests an increase in ideological polarization in America. Ideological polarization happens when people hold strongly opposing views on issues that are associated with a political ideology, such as the role of government, economic policies, social values, and cultural norms. Unlike issue polarization, ideological polarization focuses on the overall philosophical and ideological distance between groups, not individual issues.

It's often assumed that citizens approach the world of politics with an ideology in mind. However, as discussed in Chapter 6, many citizens are "innocent" of ideology.[8] Building on Philip Converse's work, Donald Kinder and Nathan Kalmoe argue that the American electorate is not ideologically polarized. They suggest that the average

6. Pew Research Center 2014.
7. Pew Research Center 2014.
8. Converse 1964.

citizen's views on government policy show little evidence of coherent organization along party lines.[9] While political *elites* are strongly ideologically divided, ordinary voters purportedly aren't.

Amongst scholars, there is strong consensus that elites are increasingly ideologically polarized, but there is less agreement about whether the electorate is similarly polarized. One group of scholars argues that most Americans hold moderate or centrist views on most issues.[10] Another group claims that ideological polarization has increased dramatically since the 1970s, both among the mass public and elites.[11] We take no stand on this empirical question. Whether rank-and-file partisans are ideologically polarized, we do not know. What is undeniable, however, is that Americans *perceive* there to be more polarization today with respect to policy issues.

1.2 Affective Polarization

Traditionally, polarization was measured by differences in policy preferences and ideological orientations. However, a growing focus in research is on polarization along emotional lines. When individuals develop strong negative feelings—such as dislike, distrust, anger, loathing, fear, or even hatred—toward members of the opposing political party, this is called "affective polarization."

Affective polarization can occur without ideological polarization. For instance, Lilliana Mason contends that while Democrats and Republicans are increasingly emotionally polarized among the mass electorate, they are not ideologically so. She states, "Partisans... may say that they prefer their party because of the party's positions on issues, but at some level they also prefer the party simply because it is their home team."[12]

There is considerable evidence of affective polarization, especially in the US.[13] Social scientists use several methods to examine these partisan sentiments. One such method is the use of *feeling thermometers*, where respondents indicate their warmth or coldness towards members of the opposing party. For instance, in 1994, only 16% of Democrats and 17% of Republicans expressed very unfavorable views of each other. By 2016, these figures had soared to 55% and 58%, respectively.[14] Additionally, *trait ratings* reveal that respondents often attribute negative stereotypes to out-party members, labeling them as closed-minded, dishonest, mean, unintelligent, and selfish.[15] *Social distance* measures further demonstrate this growing divide. For instance, the percentage of partisans displeased with the idea of their child marrying someone from

9. Kinder and Kalmoe 2017.
10. Fiorina et al. 2008.
11. Abramowitz and Saunders 2008.
12. Mason 2015: 130.
13. Iyengar 2021; Iyengar, Sood, et al. 2012.
14. Pew Research Center 2016.
15. Garrett et al. 2014.

the opposite political party has risen dramatically, from less than 5% in the 1960s to 49% of Republicans and 33% of Democrats today.[16]

The rise in affective polarization has been driven almost entirely by growing negative sentiments toward the opposing party, rather than by stronger positive feelings toward one's own. This is referred to as *negative partisanship*.[17] What was once merely a mild distaste for political rivals has evolved into profound partisan animosity.

Affective polarization is closely related to other forms of polarization. According to the Pew Research Center, partisan animosity has risen sharply alongside ideological polarization.[18] Similarly, Jon Rogowski and Joseph Sutherland suggest that citizens become more affectively polarized as ideological differences between politicians increase.[19] This implies that ideological polarization contributes to affective polarization. However, affective polarization can occur without ideological polarization. Indeed, affective polarization can *increase* even as ideological divisions *decrease*.

1.3 Group Polarization

Imagine a group of people at dinner, casually discussing their concerns about littering in a local park. As the conversation unfolds, they begin to feel more strongly about the issue. By the end, their views have become more extreme: those who initially saw littering as a minor problem now consider it serious, those who once supported small fines now argue for larger ones, and those who thought litterers should be temporarily suspended from the park now call for permanent bans. This phenomenon is known as "group polarization."[20] Group polarization occurs when subjects become more radical or extreme in their views following the exchange of information with like-minded others.

The term "group polarization" is not meant to suggest that group members will shift to two poles, increasing the distance between them. Rather, they will shift *together* in the same direction, becoming more entrenched or more extreme in their views. This distinguishes group polarization from issue or ideological polarization. The latter phenomena occur when individuals or groups within a society become increasingly *divided* over specific policy issues or ideological beliefs. By contrast, group polarization requires a *uniform* movement of attitudes in one direction, toward a more radical version of one's previously held views.

Group polarization can manifest in two distinct ways. As Cass Sunstein notes, we can adopt more extreme belief *contents*, or we can increase our *confidence* in existing beliefs.[21] We will use the terms "extremism" and "radicalism" to distinguish between

16. Iyengar, Sood, et al. 2012.
17. Abramowitz and Webster 2018; Iyengar 2021.
18. Pew Research Center 2014.
19. Rogowski and Sutherland 2016.
20. Myers and Lamm 1976; Sunstein 2000, 2002.
21. Sunstein 2017: 74–5; Talisse 2019: 107.

Further Resources

Iyengar, Shanto (2021). "The Polarization of American Politics." In Michael Hannon and Jeroen de Ridder (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Political Epistemology*. Routledge, pp. 90–100.

Joshi, Hrishikesh (2020). "What Are the Chances You're Right About Everything? An Epistemic Challenge for Modern Partisanship." *Politics, Philosophy and Economics*, 19(1), pp. 36–61.

Kelly, Thomas (2008). "Disagreement, Dogmatism, and Belief Polarization." *The Journal of Philosophy*, 105(10), pp. 611–633.

Klein, Ezra (2020). *Why We're Polarized*. Simon and Schuster.

Mason, Lilliana (2018). *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. University of Chicago Press.

McCarty, Nolan (2019). *Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know*. Oxford University Press.

McCoy, Jennifer, Rahman, T., and Somer, M. (2018). "Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Policies." *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(1), pp. 16–42.

Nguyen, C. Thi (2020). "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles." *Episteme*, 17(2), pp. 141–161.

Sunstein, Cass R. (2002). "The Law of Group Polarization." *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 10(2), pp. 175–195.

Talisse, Robert B. (2019). *Overdoing Democracy: Why We Must Put Politics in Its Place*. Oxford University Press.

Chapter 9

Trust & Expertise

> There is only one expert that matters... and that's you, the voter.
>
> — Gisela Stuart (Brexit Advocate)

Introduction

Our understanding of the world is profoundly shaped by the knowledge we gain from others. Only a small portion of what we know comes to us from our immediate experience. Instead, we largely rely on information provided by others, including experts in specialized fields. This dependence enables us to accumulate vast amounts of information, but it also exposes us to risk. By depending on others, we place our welfare in their hands. Therefore, it's essential to trust reliable sources. If we fail to trust the right people or discern genuine expertise, we can be manipulated, deceived, or simply misled by incomplete or inaccurate information.

Democratic societies today are confronting a profound crisis of trust in expertise. Across the globe, skepticism towards traditional institutions and authorities is intensifying. Media outlets are frequently dismissed as biased or unreliable, politicians are viewed as dishonest and corrupt, and citizens frequently disregard expert advice on critical public issues. This growing distrust extends not only to experts and politicians but also to fellow citizens. As faith in experts, politicians, and each other diminishes, democratic societies struggle to find common ground on pivotal issues such as public health, climate change, and economic policy. This presents a grave challenge for effective governance and threatens the foundations of democratic systems.

This purported crisis is not merely characterized by a lack of trust; it also involves misplaced trust. As skepticism towards established experts increases, dubious sources often gain unwarranted credibility. Instead of assessing information based on its reliability or the expertise behind it, many individuals succumb to confirmation bias, trust self-serving charlatans, and favor ideologically aligned narratives. This distortion of

the information ecosystem has paved the way for misinformation to flourish, creating a public that is simultaneously overly skeptical and dangerously credulous.

A flurry of recent publications reinforces this narrative. Books such as *The Death of Expertise* and *The Crisis of Expertise* highlight the growing skepticism toward traditional authorities.[1] Op-eds like "Democracy and the Crisis of Trust" and "How America Stopped Trusting the Experts" reflect widespread anxieties about the erosion of confidence in expert judgment.[2] Academic articles portray a "global trust deficit" and a culture of "distrust of relevant experts."[3] These works collectively emphasize a disturbing trend: the erosion of public trust in democratic institutions, government agencies, science, mainstream media, and even fellow citizens. To resolve this crisis, it's widely believed that we must restore our trust in credible and qualified epistemic authorities.

Yet, the proper relationship between democracy and expertise is more complex than is commonly portrayed. According to some scholars, there is an inherent tension between democracy and expertise: if every voice has equal weight, why should we privilege the opinions of experts? Furthermore, the very notion of expertise, especially in moral and political judgment, is highly contentious. Are there moral or political experts? Meanwhile, reliance on technical expertise presents its own unique challenges, including concerns about governance by technocrats.

While there are valid concerns about a lack of trust in experts, others caution against blind trust and granting them too much authority. Steve Fuller, for instance, describes society's growing reliance on experts as "the biggest single problem facing the future of democracy."[4] Similarly, Noreena Hertz claims we are living under "a tyranny of the experts."[5] Determining the appropriate role of experts in a democracy is a key theoretical and practical issue, with significant implications for how democratic societies navigate complex policy decisions.

In this chapter, we explore the appropriate relationship between trust, expertise, and democracy. We suggest an approach that acknowledges the crucial role of experts in shaping policy and guiding decisions, while respecting democratic principles and public participation in governance. To achieve this balance, it's essential to cultivate a culture of transparency and accountability where experts are both accessible and answerable to the public. This requires fostering a critical public that can engage with expert knowledge without being overshadowed by it.

We begin by reviewing empirical trends that signal a crisis of trust. These reports warn that many citizens place *too little* trust in experts. We then suggest a different narrative by unpacking the potential tension between democracy and expertise. In

1. Eyal 2019; Nichols 2017.
2. Emmons et al. 2023; Fattal 2024.
3. Flew 2021; Millar 2023.
4. Fuller 2006: 348.
5. Hertz 2013: 81.

particular, we raise concerns about citizens exhibiting *too much* trust in experts. This leads to a discussion of how we might reconcile the tension between democratic values and expert authority. We examine different conceptions of expertise, the criteria for identifying experts, and their implications for democratic theory. We then distinguish several sources of skepticism about experts and emphasize the role of values in trusting experts. The chapter ends by highlighting the promise and pitfalls of thinking for yourself.

1. A Crisis of Trust

Is there a crisis of trust? A wealth of data suggests so. Numerous surveys point to a sharp decline in public trust toward experts, news media, and government. In 2022, for example, only 34% of Americans trusted the mass media to report the news fairly and accurately, with a record low of 39% expressing no trust at all.[6] Trust levels were even lower in the United Kingdom, Australia, France, Sweden, South Korea, and Japan.[7] Global surveys from 2022 and 2024 revealed that journalists rank among the least trusted professions, surpassed only by politicians.[8] Worldwide, only 42% of people trust their government leaders to do what is right.[9]

Trust in scientists is no exception to these trends. While trust in science surged during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has since experienced a steady decline. By 2023, only 23% of US adults reported having great confidence in scientists acting in the public's best interest—a 14% decrease from April 2020. As trust declined, distrust grew. The proportion of people expressing little or no confidence in scientists more than doubled from 12% in April 2020 to 27% in November 2023.[10]

Partisan affiliation magnifies these patterns. From 2020 to 2023, the percentage of Republicans expressing little to no confidence in scientists acting in the public's interest nearly tripled, from 14% to 38%. By contrast, a large majority of Democrats (86%) continue to express at least a fair amount of confidence in scientists to act in the public's best interests.[11] While recent events have exacerbated this partisan divide, it predates the COVID-19 pandemic. Even in 2019, Democrats were substantially more likely than Republicans to express high confidence in scientists (43% vs. 27%), a gap that has persisted since at least 2016. Yet, partisanship affects trust in science selectively; partisan views on scientific experts often depend on the specific issue under consideration.[12]

6. Brennan 2023.
7. Majid 2023.
8. Edelman Trust Institute 2024; Majid 2023.
9. Edelman Trust Institute 2024.
10. Pew Research Center 2023.
11. Pew Research Center 2023.
12. Stanovich 2021b.

Democrats and Republicans are also divided on what role scientific experts should play in policymaking. In 2019, 73% of Democrats believed scientists should actively participate in policy debates, compared to only 43% of Republicans. Most Republicans (56%) felt scientists should focus solely on establishing facts, avoiding policy discussions altogether. Partisans were equally divided over whether scientists were better at making decisions about policy issues: 66% of Republicans thought experts were just as good or even worse than non-experts, whereas 54% of Democrats trusted scientists to perform better. Unsurprisingly, partisans are also divided over whether scientists are biased: 62% of Democrats thought scientists base their judgments on facts alone, while 55% of Republicans didn't expect scientists to be less biased than the general public.[13]

This growing distrust of experts is troubling. As societies face increasingly complex challenges, the need for specialized knowledge becomes ever more critical. Climate change and economic instability, for instance, require insights from scientists, economists, and sociologists to be effectively understood and addressed. Basing policy decisions on expert advice ensures that these decisions are grounded in the best available evidence. Yet, for these policies to succeed, they need not only to be well-founded but also to garner public support. When public confidence in expertise is high, both policymakers and the general population are more likely to embrace expert recommendations. Conversely, widespread distrust can lead to resistance and undermine policy success.

Partisan divides in trust also raise concerns about fairness and democratic legitimacy. Those who trust science are more likely to accept and follow expert guidance; for instance, trust in science significantly influences vaccination rates.[14] Yet, because levels of trust vary with partisan affiliation, race, ethnicity, and education, the benefits of science may spread unevenly.[15] Further, many of today's societal challenges, such as climate change and global health crises, require collective action. Adequate public support is therefore essential to tackle these issues effectively. Lastly, if democracies base policies on expert guidance, these policies must be accepted by the public to be considered democratically legitimate. If citizens perceive politicians and officials as enforcing policies without public support, it could further erode trust in institutions and exacerbate issues like polarization.

Low levels of trust in government and media further intensify the crisis of trust in expertise. News outlets serve as crucial intermediaries between experts, policymakers, and the public, facilitating the dissemination and acceptance of policies. They provide a platform for experts and officials to share information, justify policy proposals, and garner public support. But when the public distrusts the media, this essential

13. Pew Research Center 2019b.
14. Pew Research Center 2023; Sturgis et al. 2021.
15. Pew Research Center 2023.

communication channel breaks down, limiting the government's ability to inform and persuade citizens on key policy matters.

While there's growing skepticism towards certain experts and institutions, particularly in politics, our reliance on specialized knowledge in everyday life remains steadfast. We trust mechanics with our cars, dentists with our teeth, and pilots with our air travel safety. This selective trust highlights a crucial distinction: expertise becomes contentious primarily when it intersects with policy formation and implementation. The politicization of expert knowledge often triggers doubt and resistance, especially when it influences governance and public decision-making. The crisis of trust, therefore, is not a universal rejection of expertise but a specific skepticism of its role in politics.

Why has skepticism toward expertise in politics become so widespread, and is it justified? Although recent distrust of experts seems partly divided along partisan lines, there are deeper and longstanding philosophical concerns about the role of experts in a democracy. These include questions about accountability, transparency, and the potential disconnect between experts and the public. We turn to these issues next.

2. The Tension Between Democracy and Expertise

In 1831, French political thinker and historian Alexis de Tocqueville embarked on a trip to America. Although he came to study prisons, the young aristocrat found himself captivated by American society and its democratic institutions. In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville noted a quintessential American trait: "In most of the operations of the mind, each American appeals only to the individual effort of his own understanding."[16] Tocqueville traces this impulse to the nature of American democracy, with its emphasis on equality and skepticism of tradition. He even suggests that intellectual influence "must necessarily be very limited in a country where the citizens, placed on an equal footing, are all closely seen by one another," with no one obviously or uncontroversially superior.[17] As a result, American citizens lack the "the disposition to trust the authority of any man whatsoever," opting instead to rely on their own judgment.[18]

Tocqueville's observations extend beyond America. He pointed out that any society that values equality tends to prioritize intellectual autonomy. As individuals become more equal, they feel less compelled to rely on the judgments of others. Tocqueville observed this trend in Europe, noting that the practice of intellectual self-reliance "has only been established and made popular in Europe in proportion as the condition of society has become more equal and men have grown more like one an-

16. Tocqueville [1835] 2008: 48.
17. Tocqueville [1835] 2008: 48.
18. Tocqueville [1835] 2008: 48.

Further Resources

Anderson, Elizabeth (2011). "Democracy, Public Policy, and Lay Assessments of Scientific Testimony." *Episteme*, 8(2), pp. 144–164.

Christiano, Thomas (2012). "Rational Deliberation Among Experts and Citizens." In John Parkinson and Jane Mansbridge (eds.), *Deliberative Systems: Deliberative Democracy at the Large Scale*, pp. 27–51.

Douglas, Heather (2009). *Science, Policy, and the Value-Free Ideal*. University of Pittsburgh Press.

Goldman, Alvin (2001). "Experts: Which Ones Should You Trust?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 63(1), pp. 85–110.

Grundmann, Thomas (2025). "Experts: What Are They and How Can Laypeople Identify Them?" In Jennifer Lackey and Aidan McGlynn (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Social Epistemology*. Oxford University Press.

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

Pamuk, Zeynep (2021). *Politics and Expertise: How to Use Science in a Democratic Society*. Princeton University Press.

Turner, Stephen (2001). "What is the Problem with Experts?" *Social Studies of Science*, 31(1), pp. 123–149.

Woodard, Elise (forthcoming). "What's Wrong with Partisan Deference?" In Tamar Szabó Gendler et al. (eds.), *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, Vol. 8. Oxford University Press.

Worsnip, Alex (forthcoming). "Deference to Experts." In Jonathan Dancy et al. (eds.), *A Companion to Epistemology*, 3rd ed. Wiley-Blackwell.

Chapter 10

Rethinking Democracy

> Democracy tends to perform better than the alternative systems we have tried.
> But the other systems we've tried have been awful, so it is a low bar.
>
> — Jason Brennan, *Debating Democracy*

Introduction

Around the world, democracy is frequently regarded as the gold standard for governance. It represents a collective effort to shape our futures in a way that reflects the will of the people, ensuring that every voice can be heard and every vote can have an impact. However, this noble vision faces numerous challenges. Public ignorance hinders the electorate's ability to make informed decisions. Partisan bias distorts citizens' perceptions of reality. Polarization erodes the mutual understanding needed for cooperation and compromise. Trust in experts, politicians, and fellow citizens is declining. Democracy itself is in crisis, or so we are constantly told.

Given these challenges, it is imperative to reimagine the future of democracy or, even more radically, envision new models of governance. This chapter will examine two broad ways to "rethink" democracy in light of its purported defects: optimistic approaches and pessimistic approaches.

First, we consider proposals to shift power away from ordinary citizens and toward those deemed more competent. We call this approach *democratic pessimism*. Pessimists believe that democratic systems have intrinsic limitations that cannot be fully addressed through reforms or innovations. They argue that the very nature of democracy, with its emphasis on equal participation and majority rule, inherently leads to poor policy decisions. Although pessimism about democracy can take many forms, our focus will be on *epistocracy*—a system where political influence is proportional to one's knowledge or competence.

After examining the arguments for and against epistocracy, we shift to proposals

that put power back into the hands of ordinary citizens, increasing their opportunities for collective self-government. We label this approach *democratic optimism*. The optimist recognizes that modern democratic systems have many flaws; however, they seek to leverage the normative criteria of democracy (e.g., equal participation, deliberation, and self-government) to envision new institutional arrangements that might better satisfy these criteria. The goal is to harmonize the core tenets of democracy with new ideas about what it means to govern together. We encourage readers to consider these ideas not as definitive solutions but as starting points for broader conversations about how democracy might evolve.

1. Motivating Epistocracy

In *Against Democracy,* Jason Brennan critiques democracy for its systematic flaws, arguing that it incentivizes ignorance, irrationality, and adversarial tribalism. Informed citizens, he claims, are left vulnerable to the whims of an incompetent majority. While Brennan shares the epistemic instrumentalist view that political systems should aim to produce wise decisions (see Chapter 2), he argues that democracy fails to achieve this. Instead, he champions *epistocracy*, arguing that political decision-making should be restricted to those with the requisite knowledge or competence.

Though Brennan is the most recent and vocal advocate of epistocracy, the idea is far from new. In the *Republic*, Plato envisions an ideal society governed by a select few, not the many. He envisions a ruling class of philosopher-kings who are dedicated to the pursuit of justice and the common good. While few today endorse Plato's extreme vision, the idea of knowledgeable governance has intuitive appeal. After all, no one would want to fly with an untrained pilot, so why should we accept political decisions made by the uninformed?

Epistocracies can take many forms. Unlike Plato's vision of a utopia ruled by a small elite, they do not have to be rigid or hierarchical.[1] For instance, an epistocracy could limit voting to those who pass competency tests (§2.1), grant more votes to the more educated (§2.2), or use a lottery to select a smaller group of voters and equip them with the skills required to vote competently (§2.3). Other models include empowering a wise council to veto poorly made democratic decisions (see §2.4) or aggregating voter's "enlightened preferences" (see §2.5). We discuss these possibilities below.

According to David Estlund, the case for epistocracy relies on three tenets:

1. **The Truth Tenet**: There are correct answers to at least some political questions.

2. **The Knowledge Tenet**: Some people know more of these truths than others.

1. Brennan 2016a: 15.

3. **The Authority Tenet**: Those who know more ought to have political authority over those with less knowledge.[2]

The truth tenet is independently plausible. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, it's difficult to maintain there are no better or worse decisions in politics, or no truths about political matters whatsoever. If you deny the truth tenet, then you cannot say that anyone is mistaken about their political views or decisions. You would also have to believe that there are no truths about what society ought to do. These implications seem implausible. Hence, many are willing to accept the truth tenet.

What about the knowledge tenet? Do some people have better political judgment than others? Socrates famously rejected this idea. He believed there are no experts of the relevant kind, so the authoritarian implications of epistocracy shouldn't worry us. Some contemporary scholars share Socrates' skepticism. For instance, Jeffrey Friedman and Paul Gunn say we have little reason to think that putative experts (e.g., those with social scientific knowledge) are sufficiently knowledgeable to avoid making errors as damaging as those made by voters.[3] Julian Reiss takes a similar line. He says, "There is no such thing as superior political judgment."[4]

As discussed in Chapter 9, any proposed example of a "political expert" might be controversial. However, this isn't necessarily a reason to dismiss the existence of superior political judgment. As Estlund observes, the knowledge tenet "says nothing about general agreement on who the better knowers are. It says only that there are some, not that any two people would agree about who they are."[5] To deny the knowledge tenet, one would have to claim that no amount of training or specialized knowledge would help anyone make better judgments when it comes to complex and technical areas like economics, environmental policy, and foreign affairs. This seems too strong. Hence, we may cautiously grant that some people are better at making political decisions than others, even if there is reasonable disagreement about who they are.

What about the authority tenet? Should those with more knowledge or better judgment have greater political authority? Socrates and Plato thought so: they believed that knowledge justifies power.[6] However, Estlund argues that we should reject the authority tenet because it commits the "expert/boss fallacy," i.e., the fallacy of assuming that just because someone has epistemic authority, they also have political authority.[7] This inference fails, Estlund claims, because legitimate political authority requires a justification that could be accepted by all reasonable points of view.[8] However, there is reasonable disagreement over who qualifies as an expert. As Estlund

2. Estlund 2008: 30.
3. Friedman 2019; Gunn 2019.
4. Reiss 2019.
5. Estlund 2008.
6. Crito 47c9–d2, Laches 184e8–9, Gorgias 463d1–465e1, and Republic I 341c4–342e11 in Plato 1997.
7. Estlund 2008: 3.
8. Estlund 2008: 33.

puts it, "No knower is knowable enough to be accepted by all reasonable citizens."[9]

In summary, we can grant there are political truths and that some people know them. However, there will be reasonable disagreement about *who* these experts are. Without agreement on who qualifies as an expert, no one can legitimately rule on the basis of wisdom. Thus, we must reject the authority tenet, according to Estlund.

Brennan agrees that the authority tenet is false, but he denies that epistocracy relies on it. Instead, he says that epistocracy requires the following *anti-authority tenet*:

> **The Anti-Authority Tenet**
>
> When some citizens are morally unreasonable, ignorant, or incompetent about politics, this justifies *not granting* them political authority over others.[10]

Unlike the authority tenet, which specifies the criteria for having power, the anti-authority tenet outlines the reasons for prohibiting or limiting the power of others. The epistocrat needn't claim that experts should be bosses. Instead, they need only contend that the incompetent shouldn't be in charge.

This response, while promising, raises several questions. How do we identify the incompetent, and who decides the criteria? What would an epistocratic system look like? In the following sections, we will explore five models of epistocracy, each suggesting different ways to increase the political power of the more knowledgeable or competent.

2. Epistocracy in Practice

What would epistocracy look like in practice? One of the most pressing challenges facing epistocrats is how to implement their system. Epistocrats have considered several options: competency tests, plural voting, enfranchisement lotteries, epistocratic veto, and enlightened preference voting. Each of these has advantages and disadvantages. Below we discuss the details and pitfalls of each model before turning to general objections to epistocracy in §3.

2.1 Voter Qualification Exams

Universal suffrage is widely assumed to be just. It embodies the democratic ideal that government should be of, by, and for the people. However, Brennan argues that universal suffrage is *unjust* because it violates our right to a competent electorate. He proposes replacing universal suffrage with a "moderate epistocracy," where voting is restricted to citizens who demonstrate sufficient political competence.[11]

9. Estlund 1993: 71.
10. Brennan 2011: 713; Brennan 2016a: 17.
11. Brennan 2011: 700.

Further Resources

Ackerman, Bruce, and James S. Fishkin (2008). *Deliberation Day*. Yale University Press.

Brennan, Jason (2016). *Against Democracy*. Princeton University Press.

Brennan, Jason, and Hélène Landemore (2022). *Debating Democracy: Do We Need More or Less?* Oxford University Press.

Estlund, David (2003). "Why Not Epistocracy?" In Naomi Reshotko and Terry Penner (eds.), *Desire, Identity, and Existence: Essays in Honor of T. M. Penner*. Academic Printing and Publishing, pp. 53–69.

Guerrero, Alexander (2024). *Lottocracy: Democracy Without Elections*. Oxford University Press.

Gunn, Paul (2019). "Against Epistocracy." *Critical Review*, 31(1), pp. 26–82.

Lafont, Cristina (2020). *Democracy Without Shortcuts*. Oxford University Press.

Landemore, Hélène (2020). *Open Democracy: Reinventing Popular Rule for the Twenty-First Century*. Princeton University Press.

López-Guerra, Claudio (2011). "The Enfranchisement Lottery." *Politics, Philosophy & Economics*, 10(2), pp. 211–233.

Bibliography

Abramowitz, Alan I. and Kyle L. Saunders (2008). "Is Polarization a Myth?" *The Journal of Politics* 70.2, pp. 542–555.

Abramowitz, Alan I. and Steven W. Webster (2018). "Negative Partisanship: Why Americans Dislike Parties but Behave Like Rabid Partisans." *Political Psychology* 39, pp. 119–135.

Achen, Christopher H. and Larry M. Bartels (2016). *Democracy for Realists*. Princeton University Press.

Ackerman, Bruce and James S. Fishkin (2004). *Deliberation Day*. Yale University Press.

Adams, David M. (2005). "Knowing When Disagreements Are Deep." *Informal Logic* 25.1, pp. 65–77.

Adams, John ([1776] 1980). "Thoughts on Government." *Papers of John Adams*. Ed. by Robert J. Taylor et al. Vol. 4, May 1775 - August 1776. Harvard University Press.

Adorno, T. W. et al. (1950). *The Authoritarian Personality*. Harper.

Ahlstrom-Vij, Kristoffer (2012). "Why Deliberative Democracy is (Still) Untenable." *Public Affairs Quarterly* 26.3, pp. 199–220.

— (2022). "The Case for Modelled Democracy." *Episteme* 19.1, pp. 89–110.

Aikin, Scott F. (2018). "Deep Disagreement, the Dark Enlightenment, and the Rhetoric of the Red Pill." *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 36.3, pp. 420–435.

Alesina, Alberto et al. (2020). "The Polarization of Reality." *AEA Papers and Proceedings*. Vol. 110, pp. 324–328.

Allcott, Hunt et al. (2020). "The Welfare Effects of Social Media." *American Economic Review* 110.3, pp. 629–676.

Almagro, Manuel (2023). "Political Polarization: Radicalism and Immune Beliefs." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 49.3, pp. 309–331.

Althaus, Scott L. (2003). *Collective Preferences in Democratic Politics: Opinion Surveys and the Will of the People*. Cambridge University Press.

Ancell, Aaron (2017). "Public Unreason: Essays on Political Disagreement". Dissertation. Duke University. URL: https://hdl.handle.net/10161/16353.

— (2019). "The Fact of Unreasonable Pluralism." *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 5.4, pp. 410–428.

Anderson, Elizabeth (2006). "The Epistemology of Democracy." *Episteme* 3.1, pp. 8–22.

Anderson, Elizabeth (2008). "An Epistemic Defense of Democracy: David Estlund's Democratic Authority." *Episteme* 5.1, pp. 129–139.
— (2010). *The Imperative of Integration*. Princeton University Press.
— (2011). "Democracy, Public Policy, and Lay Assessments of Scientific Testimony." *Episteme* 8.2, pp. 144–164.
Arceneaux, Kevin and Martin Johnson (2013). *Changing Minds or Changing Channels?: Partisan News in an Age of Choice*. University of Chicago Press.
Arendt, Hannah (1968). "Truth and Politics." *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. Reprinted in 1977. Penguin, pp. 227–264.
Aristotle (2017). *Politics*. Trans. by C. D. C. Reeve. Hackett Publishing.
Arneson, Richard J. (1993). "Democratic Rights at National and Workplace Levels." *The Idea of Democracy*. Ed. by John E. Roemer et al. Cambridge University Press, pp. 118–148.
— (2009). "The Supposed Right to a Democratic Say." *Contemporary Debates in Political Philosophy*. Ed. by Thomas Christiano and John Christman. Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 197–212.
Ashworth, Scott (2012). "Electoral Accountability: Recent Theoretical and Empirical Work." *Annual Review of Political Science* 15.1, pp. 183–201.
Bacon, Francis ([1620] 1939). "Novum Organum." *The English Philosophers from Bacon to Mill*. Ed. by E. A. Burtt. Random House, pp. 24–123.
Bagg, Samuel (2018). "The Power of the Multitude: Answering Epistemic Challenges to Democracy." *American Political Science Review* 112.4, pp. 891–904.
— (2024). "Sortition as Anti-Corruption: Popular Oversight against Elite Capture." *American Journal of Political Science* 68.1, pp. 93–105.
Ball, James (2018). *Post-Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World*. Biteback Publishing.
Ballantyne, Nathan (2016). "Verbal Disagreements and Philosophical Scepticism." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 94.4, pp. 752–765.
— (2019a). "Epistemic Trespassing." *Mind* 128.510, pp. 367–395.
— (2019b). *Knowing Our Limits*. Oxford University Press.
Ballantyne, Nathan et al. (2022). "'Do Your Own Research'." *Social Epistemology* 38.3, pp. 302–317.
Barber, Benjamin (2003). *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*. Univ of California Press.
Barber, Michael and Nolan McCarty (2015). "Causes and Consequences of Polarization." *Solutions to Political Polarization in America*. Ed. by Nathaniel Persily. Cambridge University Press, pp. 15–58.
Barberá, Pablo et al. (2015). "Tweeting from Left to Right: Is Online Political Communication More Than an Echo Chamber?" *Psychological Science* 26.10, pp. 1531–1542.