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Epistocracy and populism: second-order ideologies challenging democracy

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ABSTRACT

Epistocracy and populism are usually seen as opposites. The first finds error in democracy's reliance on the sub-optimal decisions by the supposedly incompetent masses, and argues that political decisions should be tied to epistemic merit, not popularity. The populist critique of democracy, contrarily, finds that there is not enough political confrontation in standard representative democracies where the 'real people' are not properly embodied, and thus pits an imagined direct will of the unified and virtuous people against a self-serving establishment. This article demonstrates that these ideologies have surprising underlying similarities concerning their categorization, political ontology, epistemology and a conception of political authority. Firstly, they both are second-order political ideologies that are not directly tied with substantive political content but rather with the interpretation of how to govern assuming disagreement concerning first-order political ideologies. Secondly, their political ontology divides citizens into two constitutively differing parts, one of which they (partly) exclude from political membership. Thirdly, their political epistemology assumes the existence of political truths which makes their conception of authority anti-proceduralist, either instrumentalist or moralist. Fourthly, they downplay the value of pluralism, deliberation and dissent. Uncovering these commonalities helps us detect and understand the dynamics of some anti-democratic tendencies better.

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Introduction: two critiques of democracy

Epistocracy and populism are two popular criticisms of more standard accounts of justification and legitimacy of democracy. As second-order ideologies that criticize the standard account of democracy they differ from it through underlying assumptions on political ontology, epistemology and legitimacy-generation. The standard political ontology (an account of the circumstances of politics, the entities, their characteristics and relationships that constitute the political sphere, e.g. the nature and divisions of people, the nature of political decisions) of democracy sees 'the people' as composed of many equally

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legitimate groups composing of citizens with equal rights who sometimes have conflicting and sometimes overlapping interests. Correspondingly, standard political epistemology (an account of the role of epistemic values, if any, in politics, e.g. whether political truths exist and if so, how can one argue for, discover or construe them, whether political participation should be seen as partly cognitive or not) of democracy holds that a plurality of first-order political views are reasonable, political truths, if they exist, are not immediately known neither to the experts nor to the people, and public reason-giving is encouraged. Due to permanent reasonable disagreement among political equals, democratic legitimacy is based at least partly on a procedurally expressed equality and liberty of all citizens. This is institutionalized through, among other things, some majoritarian decision-making mechanism, representation and substantive limits such as the constitution because of practical concerns of scalability and the need for the division of cognitive labour.

By 'epistocracy' I mean an interpretation of political legitimacy which appeals to the 'correctness' or 'quality' of political decisions in order to justify anti-democratic reforms such as disenfranchisement based on education, limiting the scope of decisions made by electoral representatives, or some other way of formally disproportionally empowering the educational elite. By 'populism' I mean an interpretation of political legitimacy which appeals to the uniform moral people who enjoy a uncontroversial general will which should be implemented without regard to procedural limitations, and which in turn is in a quintessential conflict with the interests of the corrupt establishment. In this article I elaborate how these accounts differ from standard democratic interpretation of political legitimacy and resemble each other in terms of the intertwined political ontology and epistemology.

Epistocratic critique is inspired by the tension between epistemic and democratic values. This tension is not only an academic curiosity but a practical worry in many countries, demonstrated by cases where one deems democratically made choices suboptimal or epistemically ill-founded (e.g. Brexit, the election of Donald Trump as the president of the most powerful country in the world, slow response to the global environmental disruption, the electoral punishment of incumbent governments for global economic problems). The difficulty lies in striking a balance between epistemic values such as tracking an objective or intersubjective standard of correctness, reasonableness in political deliberation, listening to dissenting views, intellectual curiosity, inclusion of expertise in decision-making and democratic values such as equality, liberty, autonomy, pluralism, participation and consent.

In the evergrowing literature many authors argue for the need and/or existence of epistemic benefits of democracy (Anderson 2006; Dietrich and Spiekermann 2013; Estlund 2008; Estlund and Landemore 2018; Landemore 2013; Misak 2008; Rostbøll 2008; Talisse 2013; Tong 2021), consider epistemic values as *one part* in an hybrid interpretation of democracy which also appreciates procedural values (Anderson 2009; Cerovac 2020; Kiik 2023; Prijić-Samaržija 2018), offer democratic innovations to improve the quality of decision-making (Arlen and Rossi 2020; Cerovac 2019; Krick 2021) or claim that broader instrumental benefits outweigh the epistemic imperfection of democracy (Achen and Bartels 2016; Bagg 2018). Others, often called proceduralists or internalists, reject the need for epistemic justification of democracy and appeal to the intrinsic value of procedural fairness (Blum 2014; Fleuß 2021; Invernizzi-Accetti 2017; Saffon and

Urbinati 2013). This article concerns approaches that propose epistocratic reforms which would derive political authority from purported political wisdom (Bell 2015; Brennan 2016; Caplan 2001, 2007; Jones 2020; Somin 1998, 2016). The core of it is the truth tenet (there are more and less correct political decisions), the knowledge tenet (the 'politically wisest' can be determined with enough precision), and, crucially, the authority tenet (the politically wisest should rule) (Cerovac 2020, 10; Estlund 2008, 29).

The second criticism of standard interpretations of democracy – populism – is to a lesser extent *supported* by academics, but is widely *studied* as a phenomenon both conceptually and socio-historically (Anselmi 2018; Mouffe 2018; Mudde 2004; Pappas 2019; Rostbøll 2020; Urbinati 2019) and of practical relevance to most readers. At the same time, populism is infamously ambiguous, difficult to define (Anselmi 2018, 5; Berlin et al. 1968; Canovan 1999, 3; Mouffe 2018, 9; Pappas 2019, 13–39; Taggart 2000, 11–22) and lacks a canon, key events or international alliances (Stanley 2008, 100). Still, a broad consensus has formed on what characterizes populism: a confrontational and majoritarian conception of politics as it pits the moral people and their unitary will against the immoral, self-serving establishment (primarily 'the elite', but also some minorities), denying reasonable pluralism and opposing constitutional protection of rights. It protests against a perceived lack of efficient political means for the people to implement their sovereign will, and against the artificial consensus-seeking in liberal-rationalist understanding of politics which does not take into account the agonist nature of politics (Canovan 1981; Ivaldi and Mazzoleni 2019; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Mouffe 2005; Mounk 2018; Pappas 2019; Urbinati 2014).

The dissimilarities of the two critiques of democracy are apparent: one advocates for reducing democratic participation in favour of epistemic elitism, the other argues against the establishment and for 'giving back the power to the people'. I aim to demonstrate that these second-order ideologies have deep underlying and intertwined commonalities: the categorization as second-order political ideologies, an exclusionary political ontology, a political epistemology assuming the existence and attainability of political truths, and basing legitimacy on those truths. Previous scholars have approached the commonalities of some form of epistemic elitism (technocracy) and populism as 'forms of discourse' exemplified by the works of Rosanvallon and Laclau (C. Bickerton and Accetti 2015) or 'alternative forms of representation' (Caramani 2017) in contrast to party politics. For my analysis, which finds similar insights, I draw more on literature that specifically argues for non-democratic epistemic reforms, rather than empirical examples of technocracy. Previous comparison with populism has opted for the term 'technocracy' as an umbrella term (Caramani 2017, 55), yet I distinguish 'epistocracy' (Estlund 2008, 30) as a fundamental challenge to democracy distinct from 'technocracy'. The latter is usually understood as technical specialists aiming to achieve goals that are previously set by the society, not elites deciding those political goals. Secondly, epistocracy promotes fundamental changes in the political structure such as to disenfranchise the less educated, not just extensive use of non-political elite experts. For many purposes, the terms still are interchangeable and overlapping as their core is a perceived epistemic deficiency of standard democracy. I address the philosophical underpinnings concerning the political ontology, epistemology and legitimacy-generating ability of epistocracy and populism as ideologies.

Categorization: second-order ideologies with a multifaceted relationship with democracy

The first commonality of populism and epistocracy is their categorization. If interpreted as ideologies, both epistocracy and populism are second-order ideologies: their core claims do not concern the best policies per se, but rather political ontology, political epistemology and political legitimacy of the form of government. If first-order ideologies such as liberalism, leftism or conservatism emphasize some set of first-order commitments, values and preferences (and hence offer a more specific, practicable compass for choosing the direction of political decisions), then second-order ideologies entail how one should act if not everyone can be convinced to affirm the same first-order commitments.

Some caveats are in order due to the permanent disagreement of scholars from a variety of disciplinary, historical, geographical, methodological perspectives on what *is* populism. Approaching populism as a second-order ideology is not to deny that other researchers can create knowledge by focusing on populism as a political mobilization strategy (Barr 2017; Jansen 2011), a historical phenomenon in specific regions (Canovan 1981, 59–97), search for causal relations between populism and new digital communication tools, economic inequality and loss of common identity (Mounk 2018, 137–181), approach it as a linguistic discourse employing 'the people' as an empty signifier (Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2005), focus specifically on *right-wing* populism (Wodak, Khosravi-Nik, and Mral 2013) etc. A conceptual–theoretical account like this article offers a more general insight, and loses in specificity compared to a regional empirical study. Secondly, to understand populism as a participant in the public debate over second-order ideologies does not mean affirming that populist demands for respect or authority are always valid, fair and expressed coherently, but rather reasoning with an eye open to something intelligible to understand and to publicly endorse (Rostbøll 2023, 41–43, 199–210). Real-life populists need not offer a comprehensive account of political ontology and epistemology if it can be plausibly shown that a coherent populist ideology assumes these stances. Similarly, non-populist politicians that adhere to liberal representative democracy with constitutional separation of powers, might seldom elaborate their interpretation of democracy, yet they surely have one.

The vocabulary of 'second-order ideologies' modifies and builds on a comparison of populism and compromise treated as 'second-order political thinking and ideologies of democracy' that aim to interpret the circumstances of politics, the aim or logic of politics and democratic legitimacy (Rostbøll 2020, 3–5). The insight that populism is categorically different from first-order ideologies has been expressed through a diverse vocabulary: calling populism 'anti-political, empty-hearted and chameleonic' (Taggart 2000, 4–5), a diffuse and thin ideology (Stanley 2008), a 'thin-centred ideology' based on anti-pluralism and anti-elitism which can use various host ideologies such as conservatism, ecologism, socialism or nationalism (Mudde 2004, 544) or an ambiguous concept not corresponding to a specific political regime (Urbinati 2019, 27) with a necessarily (and not regretfully) vague and imprecise language (Laclau 2005, 118).

The terms 'thin' and 'thin-centred' ideology are paired with a variety of others: full, comprehensive, thick (Mudde 2004, 544; Stanley 2008) or host ideologies (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Categorizing an ideology as 'full', 'thick' or 'comprehensive' expresses a comparison, but does not imply how a 'thinner' ideology such as populism

relates or attaches to it. 'Host ideology' has more explanatory power, yet it remains open if a thin-centred ideology such as nationalism which was originally used to introduce the concept (Freeden 1998) ought to be a possible host ideology (Mudde 2004, 544; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 99), how do these two categories relate to each other? The insight that populism is a 'complementary ideology' practicable only with another more established ideology which specifies its concepts (Stanley 2008, 106–108) offers a clear relation and implies a fundamentally different level of abstraction. For conceptual clarity I opt for a vocabulary that explicates that populism and epistocracy operate on a more abstract level and answer different kinds of questions about politics than first-order ideologies. This is in line with a previous comparison of these phenomena describing them as overarching or abandoning the left/right dimension (C. Bickerton and Accetti 2015, 1–4). These questions relate to what entities the political sphere consists of, how to understand the epistemic dimension in politics and what legitimizes power.

Epistocrats do not argue for a specific first-order ideology, but justify a form of government. Epistemic arguments might compare the political decision-making with a single market transaction and take an instrumentalist stance on assessing policies and forms of governments (Brennan 2016, 78–80, 10–14), hope to substitute 'democratic fundamentalism' with an enhanced role of expert economists in decision-making (Caplan 2007, 186–204), emphasize the importance of a type of political legitimacy based on impartiality (e.g. courts and independent bodies) in addition to majoritarianism or substantive moral values, even when not advocating epistocracy per se (Rosanvallon 2008, 112–115), or offer 'democracy at the bottom, experimentation in the middle, and meritocracy at the top' as an alternative to the rule of the ignorant democratic masses (Bell 2015, 168–178).

A further similarity is their multifaceted and conflicting relationship with democracy: populism and epistocracy arise within it, yet argue against it in some manner (epistocracy straightforwardly, populism covertly). Populism emerges in the context of representative more-or-less liberal democracy which is it's native habitat (Müller 2016, 77) and the terrain it seeks to transform or even disfigure (Urbinati 2019). Similarly, epistocrats argue 'against democracy' (Brennan 2016), against the 'myth of the rational voter' and democratically chosen bad policies (Caplan 2007). Even outside the context of liberal democracy, theorists contrast the supposed epistemic advantages of meritocracy with democracy, asserting the short-sightedness of electoral democracy and the irrationality of voters, all the while emphasizing the value of local-level democracy and affirming a fundamental need for democratic legitimization of the system through a referenda (Bell 2015, 168–178) or propose a Confucian meritocratic system as an epistemic cure for democracy (Tong 2024).

In this analysis of epistocracy and populism, they are treated as challengers of a standard account of democracy, because a political concept and its constituent relations are most meaningfully understood within its imagined context. An appeal to the unified people against a corrupt and power-grabbing elite or an appeal to the rule of the most competent is different when utilized against hereditary dictatorship or against representative democracy. In the latter case 'the most competent' or 'the unified people' already have the possibility to win the right to govern through electoral competition. The context of democracy is maintained by many scholars of populism, calling it parasitic but a contesting adversary of representative democracy (Urbinati 2013) and is also assumed by

previous comparisons of populism and technocracy (C. Bickerton and Accetti 2015; Caramani 2017).

Political ontology: exclusionism due to a troubled relationship with existing citizens

Epistocratic and populist critiques of democracy share much in political ontology and epistemology. Their common distrust towards actually existing people who have plural worldviews and who might adhere to an 'incorrect' political stance leads to exclusionism, substituting the existing people with something else in their political imagination. In this section I demonstrate how both populism and epistocracy divide the members of a polity into two constitutive categories (in populism 'the real people and the establishment', in epistocracy 'the wise and the unwise'), one of which has access to political truths (thus constituting the set of the 'knowers') which is why the other one should be excluded.

The critique that aims for an epistocratic 'correction' of democracy often relies on the voter ignorance/irrationality literature. It appeals to empirical data about the low levels of political knowledge of individuals, individual biases and the bad decision-making capabilities of democracy (Caplan 2001; Somin 1998) to justify revealing titles like 'Against Democracy' (Brennan 2016), the 'Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies' (Caplan 2007), 'Democracy and Political Ignorance: Why Smaller Government is Better' (Somin 2016), '10% Less Democracy: Why You Should Trust Elites a Little More and the Masses a Little Less' (Jones 2020). It characterizes the people as (rationally) irrational, ignorant and all-in-all detrimental to the quality of decision-making (Brennan 2016; Caplan 2001, 2007; Schumpeter 2003; Somin 1998), politically passive disinterested simpletons or politically active biased 'hooligans' (Brennan 2016), lacking time, attention and access to information to form their opinions directly and rely on 'stereotypes' as codes to reduce cognitive effort (Lippmann 1998, 58–103). „The typical citizen drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field. He argues and analyses in a way which he would readily recognize as infantile within the sphere of his real interests' and therefore we should adopt a minimal conception of democracy, defined as the right to choose between ruling elites, rather than conceptualize democracy as decision-making by the people (Schumpeter 2003, 262). The scepticism about the abilities of the people to self-govern reaches back to Plato who compared democratic decision-making to a mob without relevant skills wanting grab control of a ship and replace the captain (Plato 2000, paras. 487–489c). Interestingly, epistocrats do not describe the people as malign, morally corrupt or egotistic – on the contrary, they emphasize the good intentions of the voters and their orientation towards perceived common good (not pure self-interest) (Bell 2015, 23; Brennan 2016, 49–50; Caplan 2007, 195). Their argument is limited to the lack of cognitive capabilities and time of the people.

In this political ontology, society does not consist of many equally legitimate groups composing of citizens with equal rights who have permanent reasonable disagreements. Rather, society is divided into knowers and the ignorant, the core question is 'Who should rule?' and the answer is obvious. This could materialize in a variety of ways: plural voting rights for the educated (Mill 1861, 188–217), forms of educational disenfranchisement, a requirement to pass a competence exam in order to qualify for the right to vote (Brennan

2016, 211–212; Caplan 2007, 197), paying for the right to vote if not passing the exam, institutionalizing an epistocratic council with a veto right (Brennan 2016, 213–218) or a meritocratic system of exams and systematic assessment of public officials (Bell 2015). Technicalities aside, the epistocratic 'improvement' (Brennan 2016, 19), 'shortcut' (Lafont 2020) or 'disfiguration' (Urbinati 2014) to compensate the disadvantages of democratic governance boils down to reducing democratic governance as 'we should hope for even less participation, not more' (Brennan 2016, 3); if epistemically optimal, more of the decisions currently considered political could be delegated to the market (Brennan 2014, 52–55; Caplan 2007, 3–4) or to the rational administration (Rosanvallon 2008); and we should avoid increasing voter turnout by the people with lower levels of political knowledge (Somin 2016, 221).

Epistocrats tie political legitimacy with the well-being of the people, argue that uneducated opinions lead to worse outcomes, and deduce that the political opinion of the uneducated people should be given less weight. Therefore the goal of exclusionism in political decision-making is higher general well-being, including for the partly disenfranchised people. This helps to avoid an outright confrontation with the notion of the people in epistocrat theory and to maintain the identification of a paternalist caretaker who, while being on the side of the people, wishes to diminish their voice. Epistocratic exclusionism is further complicated by the fact that it does not advocate for an usurpation, and therefore apparently hopes that the anti-democratic reforms will be democratically decided upon. For this purpose they have offered a psychologically clever referenda which would apply the disenfranchising laws not to the current voters, but to the future ones (Jones 2020, 112–114) or mandate a hybrid meritocratic system as a form of government for the next fifty years (Bell 2015, 177).

In populism, similarly to epistocracy, a specific understanding of 'the people' justifies an exclusion of some citizens from full political membership. If for epistocrats the criteria for exclusion is competence, then for populism it is 'belonging in the real people'. Instead of opposing to the rule of people, populists vehemently support it, and present themselves as hyper-democrats, the last guardians of true sovereignty. Populist thought thus construes 'the people' as a unitary entity, not as a vast complex of plural experiences, worldviews and aspirations (Taggart 2000, 92). It uses this construction to justify the exclusion of the *other* part of the people from what it constitutes as the *real* people, asserting that only the latter are relevant for the general will or popular sovereignty (Anselmi 2018, 8; Arato and Cohen 2017; Galston 2018, 12; Ivaldi and Mazzoleni 2019; Mounk 2018, 8–9; Müller 2016, 3; Rostboll 2019, 5; Urbinati 2014). Belonging in the right community is more important in the populist political ontology than appealing to rationality of fallible procedures, ongoing activities or the state: the social sphere and sense of belonging is taken to be more lasting and fundamental (Berlin et al. 1968, 156–157). The more one emphasizes sovereignty and belonging as the indicators of political freedom, the more it makes sense in a pluralist setting to exclude part of the people so that the remaining part could act sovereignly.

Populism and epistocracy share an exclusionary mindset, but differ significantly in their description of the excluded part of the people. Epistocrats wish to isolate policy-making from the voices of the ignorant people and protect the people from themselves. Populist thought tends to *valorize* the constructed people. However, populism only glorifies *some* of the citizens (the 'real people') as hard-working, just, authentic and equipped with

common sense that is worth more than formal education, while others (the excluded establishment) are purported to be lazy, privileged, nonvirtuous, alienated, unwise even if formally educated (Berlin et al. 1968, 9,19; Canovan 1999, 5; Pappas 2019, 44; Rooduijn 2014, 575–577; Wiles 1970, 166). Contrarily to epistocracy, the 'others' in populism are presented as not only intellectually incapable, but also morally corrupt and not belonging.

Populism has a visible discrepancy: in order to *construct the unitary* people that truly belong one needs to *acknowledge the multiplicity of people* and exclude some who are deemed not to belong. How to solve this contradiction? Laclau, a rare benevolent theorist of populism, proposes an articulative construction of the populist 'people' through constituting a hegemony, though he deems this a necessary element or terrain of *all politics*. He argues that exclusion plays a crucial role in the discursive creation of 'the people': the totalization presupposes a division of the society into two camps where 'the people' is understood as a part which discursively identifies itself with the whole and thus excludes the other part (Laclau 2005, 78–82), not as all the members of the community. In Laclau's political ontology and psychological interpretation the contingent activity of naming 'the people' plays a constitutive role of constructing the people, not merely the role of a label assigned to preexisting category, and thus nor a general will or 'the people' exist before representation (Laclau 2005, 157–164). But, as previous commentators have noted (Rostbøll 2020), if we take populism seriously as a second-order ideology from a *participants* perspective (not as observers), we cannot at the same time claim a political ontology affirming the existence of a unitary people with a non-controversial general will, and that 'the real people' do not exist prior to the populists embodying them. This would defeat the core claim of populism as authentic embodyiment of the people and turn it into another theory of competing elites who propose themselves to represent the people and thus need a mandate.

Another way to solve the populist discrepancy with the people is to define the citizens who are 'with them' as the totality of the people, the real people and acknowledge the *existence but not the moral significance* of others. Populism, if it is understood as a second-order ideology in the context of democracy, separated from full-blown authoritarianism, need not entail formal deprivation of political rights as proposed by epistocrats. Exclusion can take the form of not having proper influence and representation in public opinion-formation, be it for socio-economic reasons or due to belonging to the wrong side of the 'people vs the others' (e.g. ethnic minorities, other disempowered groups) (Urbinati 2014, 55–56). Populist exclusion preserves the formal majoritarian rights, but construes a moral framework in which it is insignificant or unwarranted to take into account the voice of those deemed not worthy of inclusion, and in which it is fair to limit the constitutional and institutional protection of minority rights (Galston 2018, 8–12). This is exemplified by Trump declaring that 'the only important thing is the unification of the people – because the other people don't mean anything' (Müller 2016, 21–22). The political ontology of imagined homogenity of the people, combined with anti-establishment rhetoric and the emphasis on 'the real people' naturally results in the exclusion of part of the people (minimally, the 'establishment') from full political membership. Preserving political rights, using democratic vocabulary and appealing to an exclusionary part of the people as the totality, makes the advocacy for political inclusion semantically even more difficult then outright denying political rights: populism retains some formal parts and the language of democracy without the ethos of it.

On the one hand, both interpretations claim to serve the people best and represent them exhaustively: the epistocrat interpretation purports to serve the people by virtue of high-quality decisions, populism by implementing the authentic will of the people, i.e. the first-order ideology of the populist leader or party. On the other hand, neither of these political logics need not have the support of the actually existent people: the populist imagination of the will of the people is not restricted with a factual support of the (majority of) people such as defined by the electoral outcomes or opinion polls. By redefining 'the people' as only part of the citizens, populism rejects the moral relevance of the others and thus needs not represent them: politics is perceived as a zero-sum power-struggle. The epistocrats maintain a pretense to represent the interests (though not the will) of the people. Yet it differs from the representation assumed in standard accounts of democracy, because epistocrats do not expect the people to understand what is best for them (otherwise the people could just vote for it and there would be no need for an epistocratic 'correction' of democracy). This is coherent with previous scholarship that has focused on the commonalities of populism and technocracy specifically as ways of alternative forms of representation to party democracy (C. Bickerton and Accetti 2015; Caramani 2017) and empirical research measuring the popularity of technocratic, populist and party-democratic attitudes towards representation (Bertsou and Caramani 2022).

In conclusion, the political ontology of epistocracy and populism have an uneasy relationship with the actually existing citizens, yet preserve a pretense of representation. They divide the citizens into two qualitatively different groups (the people and the establishment or the ignorant and the wise), base their legitimacy on the preferences of only one of them, and exclude the other group from the ones who's opinion matter (i.e. from full political membership).

Political epistemology of anti-proceduralist strong political cognitivism: no need for procedures, because we already know

In this section I explain how the exclusionism apparent in both populist and epistocratic ontology is closely tied with their common epistemological stance: anti-proceduralist strong political cognitivism. Political cognitivism is 'the view that at least for some political questions there are right or correct answers (in some sense of right or correct that remains to be defined) and that these answers can be, if not known with certainty, at least approximated to some degree' (Landemore 2013, 208). A proceduralist understanding of democracy holds that procedural fairness is central in the interpretation and justification of democracy (Saffon and Urbinati 2013), in contrast to instrumentalist understandings that are outcome-oriented. Thus an anti-procedural strong political cognitivist interpretation of political legitimacy evaluates democracy through substantive standards of the consequences it produces. For epistocracy this manifests in a traditional instrumentalism, for populism in a moralist approach.

Both populism and epistocracy treat substantive political results as the more important basis of political legitimacy than the formal fairness of decision-making. Epistocrats openly wish to protect the quality of political decisions, understood as the instrumental value of the consequences, from the corruptive participation of the unqualified masses. Pure epistocracy disregards symbolic grounds and assigns little value to decision-

making procedures being generally perceived as justified, exemplified by proclaiming that 'when we ask what makes a hammer good, we judge it by how well it functions. When we ask what makes a poem good, we often judge it by what it symbolizes and expresses' and emphasizing that politics is not a poem, nor aimed to regulate someones self-esteem, but rather a system for deciding when to exercise its monopoly on legitimate violence (Brennan 2016, 139, 125–126). Correspondingly, the forms of government are evaluated on the basis of 'better policy outcomes' or being 'more effective at producing just results, according to procedure-independent standards of justice' (Brennan 2014, 11). Populists are trickier: on the one hand, they continuously appeal to the sovereignty of the people, use the rhetoric of direct and participatory democracy, and present themselves as hyper-democrats. On the other hand, they see procedures as irrelevant at best and harmful at worst, because the core aim of politics is fulfilling the already apparent morally right decision, implementing the unitary will of the people.

The populist party can be branded as a front or an anti-establishment and anti-corruption movement which embodies the people and brings an end to the struggles for power and plunder by the other self-serving parties (Pappas 2019, 23; Taggart 2000, 28–29; Urbinati 2019, 47). Furthermore, populist voters might not be interested in increasing participation or being heard, but rather in being understood and represented directly by strong leadership (Mudde 2004, 558), making active participation superfluous. The institutional logic of representative democracy, where populism as a critique of democracy arises, forces it to take the form of a political party and to institutionalize. However this is antithetical to the essence of populism that does not recognize divisions in the real people, nor the need for procedural mediation: it represents the apolitical real people.

One way for populism to relieve this cognitive dissonance is to focus on the Weberian charismatic leader as the embodiment of the will of the people, an extraordinary person representing the ordinary people directly without any need for mediation or institutions (Taggart 2000, 99–103). The populist understanding of direct democracy might manifest itself in unmediated and unrestrained communication and in straightforward language, while still building an authoritarian organization or the centrality of a strong leader embodying the people (Rooduijn 2014). There is simultaneously 'a strong rhetorical commitment to the active and direct participation of the membership of the party' and 'the personalized leadership of key individuals' (Taggart 2000, 75). A strongman or charismatic leader who does not have to spend time dealing with procedures and institutions is a commonly ascribed characteristic of populism (Mounk 2018; Mudde 2004, 545; Pappas 2019; Urbinati 2013), because if the populist leader has already discerned the general will, further institutional bickering is superfluous (Müller 2016, 29–30). This textbook populist rationale might seem specific to populism, but note that more generally it fits nicely next to epistocracy as antiproceduralist strong political cognitivism: in populism, the 'knower' is the populist leader, in epistocracy the educational elite.

Some previous comparison of epistocratic and populist approaches has countered these knowledge claims and endorsed a pure proceduralist anti-cognitivist position, rejecting truth-claims in political matters. The argument goes that any epistemic conception of politics means that some people know better and therefore should rule (C. Bickerton and Accetti 2015, 14). However, the inclusion of epistemic values as *part* of the basis for political legitimacy does not equal a *monist epistocratic* rule. If we want to protect democracy against the epistocratic alternative or 'make truth safe for democracy',

we need not abandon all epistemic values in politics: it suffices to deem the authority tenet 'the expert/boss fallacy' and reject it (Estlund 2008, 30–36, 40–64). A *partly* instrumentalist political cognitivism which maintains epistemic values in politics is defendable when assuming the knowledge that primary bads such as famines and wars are undesirable, and hence we should, ceteris paribus, avoid political decisions or forms of government that lead to them (Estlund 2008, 160–167).

The more epistocratic an interpretation of political legitimacy is, the stronger version of political cognitivism it assumes and the more problematic it becomes. Only a strong anti-procedural political cognitivism can justify such controversial propositions as substituting the publicly debated and procedurally expressed will of the actual people with some utilitarian calculus of political decisions, rule of the more educated or of the older generations. If political legitimacy in democracy is understood purely by its consequences (substantive outcomes), then disenfranchising some people would be legitimate if it would not bring about other unwanted consequences. Epistocrats try 'to 'desacralize' the ideal of one person, one vote by showing that electoral democracies do not necessarily perform better than political meritocracies according to widely shared standards of good government' (Bell 2015, 61). Pure instrumentalism leads to many immodest conclusions: rather than feeling insulted, the disenfranchised people should get over their infantile feelings since 'we cannot let the country choke simply because people are sensitive about or have unjustified beliefs about their political competence. It seems strange to hold that we should have less just policies, greater chances of unjust war, greater poverty and so on, in order to avoid expressing the view that some people have better judgment about politics than others, especially when that judgment is true' (Brennan 2016, 122–123). If the voter qualification procedure will produce 'better, more substantively just results', one should accept that since high-income middle-aged men do 2.5 times better on surveys about basic political knowledge than low-income young black women, the latter might be overwhelmingly less likely to qualify for voter licenses, and reckon that 'this does not automatically demonstrate that epistocracy sends a racist or classist message.' (Brennan 2016, 132–135). To his credit, Garret Jones takes seriously the worry that general educational requirements would disenfranchise historically disadvantaged groups and seeks to avoid it. Yet, while seeking a way around direct educational disenfranchisement he earnestly mentions the possibility of raising the minimum age of voters to forty (Jones 2020, 107). In an age of ongoing climate disruption where 'climate anxiety and dissatisfaction with government responses are widespread in children and young people in countries across the world and impact their daily functioning' (Hickman et al. 2021, p. e863), the proposition to disenfranchise the youth is peculiar. It disregards the symbolic importance of having a say in politics, and illustrates the aim of epistocratic arguments to produce better outcomes at the expense of procedural fairness: rather than focus on enhancing voter competence, to look for a way to exclude them.

When Brennan prioritizes general interest and good outcomes straightforwardly *instead* of democratic inclusion, and proposes less democracy as the ailment of the problems of democracy (Brennan and Landemore 2022, 68), Rosanvallon maintains that the epistemic institutions *are* in fact democratic: they are just receiving their legitimacy not through a process of elections and mandates from the people, but directly through exams and the identification with social generality (Rosanvallon 2011). Fundamentally,

he maintains that majority rule is only one decision-making procedure used by democracy, although often misidentified with the whole of democracy (as is 'a majority' with 'the people'). An appeal to 'identifying with the social generality' and impartiality similarly downplays proceduralism even if Rosanvallon does not suggest grandiose structural reforms like Brennan. This understanding equals democratic mandate and technocratic self-identification as representation (C. Bickerton and Accetti 2015, 11–12). Even the most palatable propositions to reduce democracy – such as increasingly independent central banks or staggering the elections across time – lean heavily on an instrumentalist understanding of political legitimacy, i.e. 'the goal isn't to grant individuals the sacred right to participate in the legislative process; the goal is to get better policy outcomes' (Jones 2020, 42–49, 146–147, 111).

Likewise to populists, epistocrats might not explicate their political epistemology which is needed to enable a purely instrumentalist justification of political legitimacy. Nevertheless, they imagine away the ideational heterogeneity among humans and assume the ability to reliably predict the interpretations of some technocratic invention by the wide variety of people it affects. This 'relies, then, for its appearance of legitimacy, on ideationally dehumanizing those it attempts to control' (Friedman 2019, 141). If someone holds that uncontroversial technocratic solutions to social problems are readily at hand, they might not reflect on the inaccuracy of the their simplistic social ontology, their bias to overestimate the power of good will, possibility to establish neat causal relations of possible political interventions, yet the assumptions are detectable in the theory (Friedman 2019, 291, 303). Behind the exclusionary propositions of epistocracy lies a non-democratic assumption concerning the role of reason-giving. Epistocracy holds that decisions need to be justified in the abstract, purely in terms of the epistemic dimension and the outcome, while a democratic justification should be aimed at *all of those people* whom justification is owed due to their political membership (implying expected compliance) and in terms they can understand (Lafont 2020, 98–100, 163–170).

Both populism and epistocracy share an anti-proceduralist sentiment, an assumption of sufficiently uncontroversial political knowledge available to them. They disregard procedural fairness through moralism or instrumentalism, and defend an outcome-oriented understanding of the justification of the distribution of political power. Populists 'usually claim that the results of the democratic regime are poor, and to remedy this situation they propose to adjust the procedural dimension of the democratic system (e.g. strengthen popular sovereignty at the cost of constitutionalism)' (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012, 19). Epistocrats aim for an undemocratic shortcut such as an epistocratic counsel, voter qualification test, delegating more decisions to markets or to bureaucracy to dampen the influence of unreasonable and bothersome people so that the epistemic elite could make better decisions.

Common dangers: downplaying the value of deliberation and pluralism

Both populism and epistocracy, understood as second-order ideologies, criticize standard accounts of democracy, exclude part of the people in their political ontology, and disregard procedural fairness due to strong political cognitivism in their political epistemology. What further commonalities and practical lessons does this imply? I elaborate two

intertwined conceptual problems with immediate practical consequences for day-to-day politics: anti-pluralism, depoliticization and downplaying deliberation.

The stronger and more rigid the stance on procedure-independent standards on the normative assessment of the political outcomes is, the less it can accommodate pluralism. In the face of disagreement where one position is held objectively epistemically superior, there is little *epistemic* reason to compromise as this would simply dilute the correctness of the decision. This accusation has also been directed at the non-monist epistemic democrat (Invernizzi-Accetti 2017, 19), although the relevance of the accusation depends on how strong and monist are the epistemic claims. Epistemic democrats might argue for *weak* political cognitivism, assessing democratic decisions in terms of basic values such as preserving human life (Landemore 2013, 211–213), avoidance of primary bads such as wars and famines (Estlund 2008, 160–163). Weak political cognitivism (e.g. avoidance of fundamental political bads, while not claiming to find out the one correct decision for each political question), hybrid conceptions of democratic legitimacy (epistemic virtue constituting only a part of political legitimacy), and a dynamic understanding of epistemology (e.g. pragmatist epistemology instead of the strict framework of the correspondence theory of truth) can be more effortlessly accommodated with reasonable pluralism (Kiik 2023).

The populist understanding of democracy similarly holds that decisions can be correct or incorrect, although through a moralist lens of whether the decisions follow the supposedly uncontroversial will of the people. This unitary will of the people which makes proceduralism redundant in populism leaves no room for pluralism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 81), not in terms of civil society (Arato and Cohen 2017, 287–289), nor for plural parties expressing the varying preferences, interests and worldviews existing among the people since this multiplicity is equated by populism with partiality and the unwanted political establishment (Urbinati 2019, 45–48). If decisions are about following the morally right will of the people, then dissent can only mean going against the people and being not properly part of the people (Müller 2016, 48, 80) or a sign of crisis, rather than an essential component of democracy (Urbinati 2019, 8–11). Instead of deliberation and compromise-seeking, while holding on to ones first-order political ideologies, populism leaves no room for reasonable disagreement or doctrinal pluralism and looks for the logic and essence of politics in non-compromising antagonism (Rostboll 2019, 18; Rostbøll 2020). The logic in political ontology which assumes an 'other', and yet with the same breath denies the existence of any social heterogenity is totalitarian (Lefort 1986, 285). Laclau assumes this is characteristic to populism and to all politics and we can admittedly a tension between truth-claims and pluralism. But if this tension is solved through the means that Laclau proposes, using 'the people' as an empty signifier and imagining a part to be the totality, it closes the discourse and is anti-pluralist to the core (Selg and Ventsel 2020, 151–156).

The anti-pluralism leads to a practical insight about the hope that populism could rejuvenate democracy. Populism is strengthened by (felt) democratic deficiency (Mudde 2004, 561–562) and has been explained as a reaction to the feeling that technocratic and non-elected institutions do not represent the people (Müller 2016, 96). Correspondingly, populism has been treated as having potential to re-politicize and deepen democracy (Mouffe 2018), being a democratic response to 'authoritarian populism' (Bugaric 2019), foster interest and participation in politics or otherwise increase the quality of

democracy, even by its critics (Anselmi 2018, 106–108; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 83). Because it is hostile to intellectuals, damns the corrupt elite and the power of non-elected institutions, in some sense populism opposes epistocracy, having been deemed the 'direct opposite' of *both* elitism and pluralism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 7). Admittedly, the epistocratic recategorizing of issues from the domain of 'politics and decisions' into the domain of 'expertise and finding out' has a depoliticizing effect. Nevertheless, political populism in itself has peculiar depoliticizing tendencies, because it assumes a non-procedural epistemic shortcut to the will of the people. If we compare populism to a standard understanding of democracy that appreciates deliberation and pluralism, populism has a depoliticizing effect hidden in its political logic. Namely, populism assumes a recategorization of issues from the domain of 'politics and decisions' into one of 'uncontroversial and apparent general will'. It opposes pluralism and a more deliberative understanding of democracy in which a tentative will of the people can only be temporarily constructed through permanent public discussion, contesting and elections. If both the epistocratic and populist ideologies are depoliticizing, then neither should be the cure for the other. Regardless of the populist promise to rejuvenate and politicize democracy, inherently it contradicts democracy, because it opposes pluralism and deliberation. Furthermore epistemic elitism and populism have even been curiously combined in 'techno-populist' parties (C. J. Bickerton and Accetti 2018).

There is another way to see populism as contributing to democratization, namely along the lines of shocking the mainstream parties or the general public and forcing politicians to reconnect with the people. Populism is sometimes treated as a necessary evil that the political theorist as a bystander could deem useful (to revitalize liberal representative democracy), but populism offers *itself* as an interpretation and public justification of democracy from the first-person participatory perspective. So, if we are not rooting for populism as a conception of democracy, but rather observe it as potentially useful to promote another conception of democracy like liberal or deliberate democracy, we treat populism as an external contingency that happens to have a side-effect of supporting democracy, not democratizing in itself. If, however, we take populism seriously as a *public* and *participatory* justification of democracy on its own terms, we should not focus on its possible instrumental use to liberal democracy but admit that in itself as a second-order ideology it does not qualify as a democratic ideology (Rostbøll 2020, 2023, 194–199), because it fails one task that any theory of democracy has: to explain the legitimacy of democratic institutions in themselves, not only as means (Rostbøll 2020, 16).

Anti-pluralism constitutes a fundamental incoherency of both populism and epistocracy with democracy. This implies that the stronger truth-claims they present, the more they are incompatible with democracy as a whole. If populism and epistocracy share these anti-pluralist and anti-deliberative stances and considerable similarities in their political ontology and epistemology, they are unlikely cures for one another. It seems that even if populists in real life are perceived to offer 'bad solutions', this should not be countered with the proposition of handing more power to the 'rational experts', not to mention the propositions further alienating people from politics through partial disenfranchisement. Furthermore, epistocratic tweaks would give the populist an even better stage to argue that the elites are hijacking politics and abandoning democracy. Democratic innovations such as deliberative minipublics, digital democracy, lotocracy

and other new forms of participation are more likely candidates to rejuvenate democracy without dismantling it.

Epistocratic tendencies or the emergence of non-elected power wielders, on the other hand, should not be 'cured' by the populist pseudo-participation of the people: the populist exclusion of the empirically existing citizens casts doubt on its re-democratizing potential. The celebration of only a part of the people by populism does not conceptually enable the meaningful participation, reasonable disagreement and democratic governance of the citizens, but rather assumes the unjustified position of epistemic superiority.

If Rawls was right that the only way to avoid permanent doctrinal pluralism in a society is by oppression, cruelty, brutality and limiting freedom which in turn leads to corruption of science and religion (Rawls 2001, 33–34) and that political disagreement is a permanent sociological fact in democratic societies, then plausible theories of democracy need to incorporate deliberation and pluralism. To the extent that epistocracy or populism is advocated in the context of improving (and not abandoning) democracy, anti-pluralism is not only a further commonality but a fundamental problem for them as second-order ideologies relating to democracy.

To be fair, many theorists of epistocracy and populism tend to argue for *limiting democracy* as we know it, and do not argue explicitly for fully *overturning* it. Epistocrats argue that improving the quality of decisions will satisfy the interests of the people, populists claim to increase sovereignty, give back power to the people and tie political decisions more directly to their will. Yet one should be careful with every 'improvement' or new conception of democracy which does not accept pluralism. The word 'democracy' is so uncontested that even authoritarian regimes will not bluntly reject it, but rather use 'the language of democracy' to legitimate their hegemonic rule (Maerz 2019), use euphemisms such as 'sovereign democracy' (Krastev 2006) and 'illiberal democracy' (Zakaria 1997), claim their people are 'not ready for democracy 'yet,' that their regimes are more democratic than they appear, or that the opposition is corrupt and antidemocratic' (Shapiro 2003, 1, 146). Therefore we are justified in being careful when considering propositions that are anti-pluralist, downplay deliberation and assume the existence of extensive political truths, even if they hope to improve democracy.

Conclusion

Populism and epistocracy as second-order political ideologies seem to be opposites at first glance: one appeals to the will of the 'real people', the other is wary of people and wishes to delegate more decisions to epistemic superiors. Even though they offer different 'corrections' to standard accounts of democracy, they have considerable similarities in their understanding of politics. First, they both are second-order ideologies with an ambivalent relationship to democracy: they arise within it, yet wish to alter it. Secondly, both are troubled by the actually existing people: to make their claim for legitimacy, both exclude some part of the citizens from full political membership (the 'establishment' or 'the uneducated', respectively). Thirdly, they share a strong cognitivist understanding of politics and an outcome-oriented, non-procedural conception of political legitimacy as they claim a non-participative shortcut to political knowledge. Fourthly, and coherently with the previous similarities, they both treat political disagreement and pluralism as an error, rather than a permanent characteristic of a free society. The rigid

conception of politically right decisions (either tied due to the superior epistemic capabilities or to the morally superior will of the people) is depoliticizing and anti-deliberative.

Observing the proximity of epistocray and populism can guide us in how to (not) cure the ills of contemporary democracies. First, instances of populism or advocates of elite-governance might not be best addressed based on their contingent first-order ideology, but rather through their fundamental interpretation of democracy. Otherwise, we miss what exactly is problematic and undemocratic about them. Secondly, when addressing polarization and an illiberal drive related to populism, institutionalizing non-democratic 'rationality' is a questionable remedy, because the epistocratic 'cure' can constitute an anti-democratic correction which excludes people, disregards procedures and advocates anti-pluralism. Thirdly, one can perceive populism not only as a demand for more sovereignty for a favoured part of the people, but additionally as an epistemic superiority claim concerning political knowledge. Exaggerated knowledge claims in the political sphere might easily convert into general claims of epistemic superiority, illustrated by cases of populist politicians disregarding science in the cases of a pandemic and climate disruption.

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