

A Note on the Epistemology of Disagreement and Politics

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In a recent essay in this journal, Martin Ebeling offers a defense of egalitarian politics based, in part, on recent research in the epistemology of disagreement.¹ Ebeling believes that there is a coherence between (1) the results of egalitarian politics and (2) the judgments of rational voters, who update their beliefs in light of political disagreement: “The *outcomes* of egalitarian decision-making . . . tend to be the most *rational* given the background condition of persistent political disagreement”.²

I consider this claim in the following pages. In my judgment it is false. Nevertheless, Ebeling’s essay is an important one, as it is one of the first attempts to draw political lessons from the spirited (Ebeling calls it “virulent”) philosophical debate about disagreement.³ It is quite natural to think that if our beliefs should be modified by disagreement then there are ramifications for our politics—but neither political theorists nor epistemologists have explored this matter in any detail.

I will make two points. First: Rational voters do not modify their beliefs as Ebeling believes that they do. Because voters are not, in general, epistemic peers, the conciliatory theory of disagreement that Ebeling endorses (or any other theory, for that matter) does not apply. Second, for technical reasons, conciliationism will not, in general, produce beliefs that correspond to the results of egalitarian political processes.

1. *Epistemic peerhood in the electorate.*

Theories of disagreement tell us how we ought to modify our beliefs, if at all, in the face of disagreement from our *epistemic peers*—people who are (1) roughly as knowledgeable as we are about the matter at dispute, and (2) roughly our intellectual equals.⁴ If this epistemic peerhood relation does not hold, then conciliationism (or any other theory of disagreement) doesn't apply.

At first blush, it does not appear that any claim about large-scale epistemic parity within the electorate could be correct. 38% of the American electorate knows which party controls the House of Representatives; 44% does not know; and 17% erroneously believes that the minority party does. 36% of the electorate can name all three branches of government; 29% can name one or two of them; and 35% can name none.⁵ The literature on the state of political knowledge is extensive and depressing, and it shows—the important thing for our purposes—that the electorate is heterogeneous in this respect. As Scott Althaus summarizes things, roughly a quarter of the electorate is well informed, a quarter is systematically misinformed, and the middle 50% suffers serious defects in political knowledge.⁶

In addition, voters differ wildly in their ability to think rationally, thus violating the second necessary condition for epistemic parity. For example, some voters suffer from serious cognitive biases, such as racism, and others do not.⁷ Further complicating matters is that sometimes the most knowledgeable voters are the least rational ones.⁸ In short, when it comes to epistemic peerhood within the electorate, the situation is a mess.

To his credit, Ebeling does not make the implausible claim that voters are generally epistemic peers. He claims instead that they “ought to regard the judgments informing their votes as equally reliable given the relevant threshold of comparison defined by their epistemic role in the decision procedures of modern democracies.”⁹ Ebeling's idea is that voters benefit

from the work of political parties, which act as “epistemic enrichment facilities,” “significantly eas[ing] . . . cognitive burdens” on voters and ultimately producing coherent and specific ideological platforms.¹⁰

I am skeptical that parties do such a thing, but let us grant that it is true. It simply does not follow that an individual voter is justified in regarding her political judgments as equally reliable as those of her fellow party members. What follows, instead, is that she is justified in regarding her party’s ideology as more likely to be correct than her own (however we end up defining “correct”.)

As a practical matter, this might mean that an individual voter is rationally justified in voting for her party’s nominee rather than an independent candidate who better reflects her personal preferences. But rationality does not demand that she be indifferent between her candidate and some other independent candidate who is preferred by one or more of her fellow voters. That indifference *would* follow, however, if she truly regarded her fellow party members’ judgments as equally reliable.

Consider Eddie, an economist, who voted Republican because he believes that free markets best promote the general welfare. Fred, a farmer, voted Republican because he wants the White House free of traitorous Muslims. (43% of Republicans believe that President Obama is a Muslim.)¹¹ It may well be that the Republican Party platform is more coherent and specific than Eddie’s is. But even if that is true, and even if Eddie and Fred had an equal role in the process that produced that party platform, Eddie should not regard Fred’s political judgments as equally reliable. Indeed, if Eddie is familiar with the way that Fred forms his judgments, he is rationally required to regard Fred as his epistemic *inferior*. A rational Republican today is

obliged to regard the votes cast by many of his fellow party members as results of an unreliable cognitive process. They are not his peers.

Now, Ebeling would be correct if parties (1) aggregated individual preferences in an epistemically valuable way and (2) voters simply adopted, wholesale, the resulting ideological platform. If that were the case, then each voter would be justified as regarding his fellow party members as peers, for each member's ideology would be formed in an equally reliable (indeed, identical) way—it would be delivered to him by an epistemic superior (*viz.* the party). But that does not actually happen. And if it did it would render the whole issue of disagreement moot, for there would be no intraparty disagreement at all.

Note, also, that some epistemic enrichment processes are better than others. No matter how coherent and specific the Republican Party's platform is right now, it would be better if it were influenced by more sober economists and fewer irrational racists. (A similar claim can be made for the Democrats, of course.) If Ebeling is right and the party process has the epistemic value that he believes that it does, the challenge is then to make that process as valuable as possible. Those of us inclined to meritocratic political systems believe that the way to do so is to vest more knowledgeable and rational voters with more political power. Rather than strike a new blow for egalitarianism, Ebeling's argument, if it is sound, only changes the terms of the debate; instead of asking which processes produces optimal political outcomes, we ask which processes produce optimal party platforms. The underlying dispute between egalitarianism and meritocracy remains.

2. *Two technical worries.*

Conciliationism, as its theory currently stands, does not support Ebeling's conclusions.

Moreover, generalizing the theory to handle disagreement among multiple people—a necessary step if we wish to apply it to politics—is not straightforward.

Ebeling says that “we can . . . conceive the median voter as the voter who endorses a judgment that expresses, or is close to, the conciliatory position between disagreeing peers.”¹² In general, there will not be a congruence. Consider Ebeling's example:

Tax Rates. Five legislators have to determine the rate of the income tax. We assume that these legislators regard each other as equal epistemic authorities with respect to the justice of income tax rates. They have argued in good faith about the issues for a considerable amount of time but have failed to reach an agreement. After deliberating sincerely about the issue for a considerable amount of time, Legislator 1 prefers a tax rate of 40%, Legislator 2 of 50%, Legislator 3 of 60%, Legislator 4 proposes a tax rate of 70%, and Legislator 5 of 80%.¹³

Ebeling thinks that the “correct”—*i.e.* rational—post-conciliation belief is that the optimal tax rate is 60%. In general, conciliationism will not produce this result.

Theories of disagreement apply to epistemic peers who dispute the truth of an individual proposition. If the five legislators were simply disagreeing about the proposition *we should implement a 60% tax*, and three legislators said “yes” and two said “no,” then the conciliatory belief would accord with the median judgment.

But in **Tax Rates**, there are at least five propositions in play (*viz.* *the tax rate should be 40%, the tax rate should be 50%, the tax rate should be 60%, the tax rate should be 70%, and the tax rate should be 80%*)—and, therefore, a total of 25 relevant beliefs. We are only given 5 of these, so the scenario is underdescribed. In any plausible real-world example, we will also expect our legislators to hold opinions about other potential tax rates—that is, about propositions like *the tax rate should be 75%*. In addition, a belief in a proposition p is more accurately modeled by a continuum of confidences running from 0 to 1 (inclusive), where 0 represents perfect certainty that p is false, and 1 perfect certainty that p is true.

With those considerations in mind, we can see why the results of conciliating and the median judgment need not agree. For example: Suppose the economy for which these legislators are contemplating tax policy is arranged such that a 60% tax would badly distort incentives but that higher and lower rates would not. Legislators 1, 2, 4, and 5 understand this; in addition to their opinions on the ideal rate (40%, 50%, 70%, and 80%, respectively), they also believe that it is vitally important that a 60% rate not be chosen. In this case, the median judgment is 60%, but the conciliatory position lies somewhere else (where exactly will depend on the specifics of the scenario).

The second technical worry is that problems arise when conciliationism is applied to groups of people larger than two.¹⁴ Ebeling assumes that a rational legislator will believe that 60% is the ideal rate, but it is unclear how conciliationism might arrive at that result.

Given current theory, an individual legislator must conciliate with each of his peers in turn. And the *order* he conciliates in matters.¹⁵ If Legislator 1 conciliates (2→3→4→5) he will arrive at a different tax rate than if he had conciliated (5→2→3→4). For example, Legislator 3—who held the “correct” belief about the tax rate, 60%, before conciliating—may end up

endorsing a rate as low as 50% or as high as 70%, depending on the order in which he conciliates with his peers. And *no matter what order they choose*, Legislators 2 and 4 cannot arrive at the desired 60%.

This is puzzling because it is not clear why the order in which a legislator consults his peers should make any difference to his final beliefs. Yet the order does make a difference.

A natural response here is to say that Legislator 1 ought to conciliate with some abstract entity that represents the aggregation of the other legislators' preferences. Two problems immediately arise. First, Legislator 1 cannot simply average the other peers' beliefs—which would seem to be the sensible approach—and conciliate with that: He (and Legislators 2, 4, and 5, were they to follow the same norm) would arrive at the wrong result (*i.e.* not 60%). Moreover, they would all disagree with each other after conciliating—odd since, *ex hypothesi*, they are epistemic peers. Second, no matter how the other legislators' preferences are aggregated, if that aggregation has epistemic value, as we have supposed that it does, then Legislator 1 is no longer disagreeing with an epistemic peer—he is disagreeing with an epistemic *superior*. And so conciliationism doesn't apply.

I suspect that some of these issues would be resolved by a more sophisticated, multi-peer theory of conciliationism. Nevertheless, given the many well-known problems related to the aggregation of preferences, and the formal results that support meritocratic rather than democratic decision procedures, we should not be too hasty in thinking that conciliationism and egalitarian politics go hand-in-hand.¹⁶

¹ Martin Ebeling, “Epistemic Political Egalitarianism and the Role of Political Parties,” *Political Theory* (forthcoming): 1-28. Published electronically September 23, 2015.

doi:10.1177/0090591715605352.

² Ibid, 2.

³ One philosopher who has begun to consider this connection is David Christensen, “Disagreement and Public Controversy,” in *Essays in Collective Epistemology*, ed. Jennifer Lackey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 142-66.

⁴ The best introduction to the epistemology of disagreement is Richard Feldman, “Reasonable Religious Disagreements,” in *Philosophers without Gods: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular Life*, ed. Louise M. Antony (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 194-214. In the literature one sometimes finds epistemic peerhood described as a relation between two people *equally likely to be correct* about some proposition. Ebeling puts it this way in his essay. For our purposes, the distinction doesn’t matter.

⁵ “Americans Know Surprisingly Little about Their Government, Survey Finds,” *Annenberg Public Policy Center*, September 17, 2014,

<http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/americans-know-surprisingly-little-about-their-government-survey-finds/>.

⁶ Scott L. Althaus, *Collective Preferences in Democratic Politics: Opinion Surveys and the Will of the People* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003). For an up-to-date review of the research on voter knowledgeability, see Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, forthcoming).

⁷ See, e.g., Josh Pasek, Alexander Tahk, Yphtach Lelkes, Jon A. Krosnick, B. Keith Payne, Omair Akhtar, and Trevor Tompson, “Determinants of Turnout and Candidate Choice in the

2008 U.S. Presidential Election: Illuminating the Impact of Racial Prejudice and Other Considerations,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 73 (2009): 943-94.

⁸ See, e.g., Brendan Nyhan, Jason Reifler, and Peter A. Ubel, “The Hazards of Correcting Myths about Health Care Reform,” *Medical Care* 51 (2013): 127-32.

⁹ Ebeling, “Epistemic Political Egalitarianism,” 11, italics removed.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12, 7.

¹¹ *CNN/ORC International* poll, September 13, 2015, <http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2015/images/09/12/iranpoll.pdf>.

¹² Ebeling, “Epistemic Political Egalitarianism,” 17.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Thomas Mulligan, “Disagreement, Peerhood, and Three Paradoxes of Conciliationism,” *Synthese* 192 (2015): 67-78.

¹⁵ I thank Nate Biebel for bringing this to my attention. I also point the reader to Georgi Gardiner, “The Commutativity of Evidence: A Problem for Conciliatory Views of Peer Disagreement,” *Episteme* 11 (2013): 83-95, which came to my attention after this note was written.

¹⁶ On the advantages of meritocratic decision procedures, see, e.g., Bernard Grofman, Guillermo Owen, and Scott L. Feld, “Thirteen Theorems in Search of the Truth,” *Theory and Decision* 15 (1983): 261-78, and Shmuel Nitzan and Jacob Paroush, “Optimal Decision Rules in Uncertain Dichotomous Choice Situations,” *International Economic Review* 23 (1982): 289-97.