



THE LONDON SCHOOL
OF ECONOMICS AND
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

Truth and Validity in Electoral Deliberation: Towards a ‘Narrative Turn’ in Epistemic Democracy

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Sept. 2020

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A dissertation submitted to the Government Department of the London School of Economics and Political Science for the degree of Master of Science in Political Theory

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Introduction

In their book “The Epistemic Theory of Democracy” (henceforth, EDT), Robert E. Goodin and Kai Spiekermann provide a sophisticated and comprehensive exposition of the increasingly popular theoretical perspective known as *epistemic democracy*. This dissertation seeks to contribute to the course of theorising charted by EDT, so as to address the issue of the applicability of EDT’s argument about the ‘wisdom of crowds’ to real-life instances of democratic decision-making, i.e. voting in elections and referenda.

Two existing lines of criticism of Goodin and Spiekermann’s argument in EDT are pertinent to my thesis. In his review of the book, Pamuk (2020) takes issue with the centrality of ‘evidence’ in EDT’s account of democratic truth-tracking process - the task of a ‘best responder’, he contends, is rarely as straightforward as weighing the evidence at hand against a juridical standard of proof. He thus maintains that “the kind of competence most valuable for voters would be a meta-competence in assessing the quality of the decision situation and determining what to do in response to the limitations of expertise and the risks of error” (Pamuk, p. 599). In another review, Bright (2019) questions the applicability of EDT’s argument about democracy’s truth-tracking potential to real-life democratic decision-making. Worrying that it might be impossible to credibly isolate the truth-aptness aspects of the questions that democratic electorates deal with, he makes a point worth citing in full:

“Democracies are regularly faced with a messy admixture of factual, normative, aesthetic and political problems. It would be nice to have some model which made explicit how these sort of issues interrelate. With this in hand we could have informed discussion of how plausible it is that votes will be competently made and sincere in the requisite ways for a CJT-esque argument to be made here. A full defence of epistemic democracy awaits this last hurdle being overcome.” (Bright, p. 566)

This dissertation aims to directly address Bright’s line of critique. The kind of deliberation in which a democracy partakes during the electoral process is indeed a *messy* and multi-faceted affair; accordingly the main goal of the present discussion is to devise a model that can respond to the problem of epistemic democracy’s applicability to real-life situations of democratic decision-making. I defend epistemic democracy’s general thesis about the epistemic superiority of democratic processes over non-democratic alternatives; however, I seek to show that, to strengthen the persuasive force of EDT’s argument in its real-life applications, its original framework of deliberation should be modified.

That said, this dissertation’s argument will proceed as follows. In the first Section, I identify two aspects of democratic deliberation relevant to the project of epistemic democracy which, in my view, remain under-theorized in EDT. I argue that what is missing from EDT’s account of democratic deliberation is an overarching model that orders the various deliberative categories employed in EDT’s discussion (1.1). I further suggest that the EDT’s exclusive emphasis on instrumental rationality fails to adequately appreciate the prominence

of communicative action in political thinking (1.2). These considerations motivate the introduction of a narrative-based model of electoral deliberation in the Section. In this model, the meaning of electoral propositions written on ballots is seen as inherently under-determined (2.1), and narrative is posited as a notion that can encapsulate the interpretative aspect electoral competition (2.2). Following a discussion of the concept's components and different subtypes (2.3), I introduce the subtype of 'electoral narrative' to define interpretative devices whose essential task is to stipulate 'what this election is *really* about' (2.2) (2.3)

In the third Section, the category of 'validity' is introduced as the standard of correctness in the evaluation of electoral narratives. I contend that a narrative model of electoral deliberation must find a place for a truth-like category, which does not need to be 'Capital T' truth as long as it can serve as its functional equivalent (3.1). I call this category 'validity' and explicate its nature and properties (3.2), as well as the properties and relevant criteria that pertain to validity judgments (3.3). In the fourth Section, I specify the socio-political conditions in which validity judgments are possible. Electoral narratives are expressed and received in context, and that context, I argue, is what Habermas calls 'lifeworld' (4.1). I emphasize one specific dimension of 'lifeworld', namely the ideological dimension, and in it discern two conditions of possibility for validity judgments (4.2).

In the fifth and final Section, I suggest how the project of epistemic democracy can be recast within the framework of a narrative model of electoral deliberation. A preliminary sketch of how the key terms of epistemic democracy can be reinterpreted (5.1) is followed by a discussion of two relevant terms - *wisdom* (5.2) and *expertise* (5.3).

Section I TWO OPEN QUESTIONS FOR EPISTEMIC DEMOCRACY

1.1 Facts, values, preferences, priorities - the missing model of democratic deliberation

An electorate is more than just a large number of isolated individuals simultaneously trying to answer the same question. Crucially, electorates deliberate, and that is what makes them entities of interest to social science. Accordingly, any attempt to theorize the epistemic potential of voting processes in which democratic electorates partake ought to include an account of democratic deliberation. Such an account should do more than cite the relevant factors that bear on individual and collective decision-making - it should suggest an appropriate paradigm for understanding how these factors interact at the individual and collective level and what role each of them plays in the deliberative exercise. In other words, we need a model, and the ETD seems to get us only halfway there.

Four principal categories can be discerned from ETD's discussion of democratic deliberation – (1) *facts*, represented by truth claims about objective states of affairs, and ascertained on the basis of available *evidence*, (2) *values* reflected in normative judgments,

(3) *preferences* derived from utilitarian calculus, and (4) *priorities* among different political goals.¹

According to the ETD, the “plain brute facts of the world” - what Williams called ‘everyday truths’ (2002) and Arendt called ‘factual truths’ (2000) - are expressed by propositions that describe states of affairs, assert causal connections, or posit courses of action optimal to achieving specified ends (19.1, p. 305). Thus construed, the category of *facts* appears to apply to a remarkably broad spectrum of propositions - from simple empirical observations (e.g. ‘that H₂O boils at 100 degrees C at sea level’), to causal inferences drawn from complex analyses of data (e.g. ‘that smoking increases the risk lung cancer’ (p. 323)) all the way to conclusions that rely on entire scientific theories (e.g. the theory of evolution or anthropogenic climate change (p. 322)). ETD's notion of facts implies a correspondence theory of truth - ‘getting the facts right’ is a matter of gaining mediated access to an objective “true state of the world” or the way things really are regardless of our ideas about them, and *evidence* is the medium by which we obtain that access (1.6.2., p. 10). In this sense, voters’ *competence* describes the quality of access to the true state of the world that voters can obtain given the evidence at hand (4.5.2., p. 55). This ability is measured against that of a hypothetical ‘best responder’, i.e. “someone who does the best epistemically that can be done, given the decision situation” (ETD 5.3, p. 77).

While facts are clearly the central category of ETD’s model of democratic deliberation, *values* are relevant too, for “disputes over values lie at the heart of politics” (4.1., p. 38). Importantly, values are posited as being the only other category that may be considered truth-apt - ETD presents two perspectives, moral realism (4.1.1, pp. 38-39) and moral conventionalism (4.1.2, p. 40), according to which normative judgments can be ascribed a truth-value, whether derived from a transcendental principle (e.g. ‘the dictate of reason’) or generated by social convention. The remaining two categories, *preferences* and *priorities*, are far less central to ETD's discussion of deliberation. Mentioned in the context of CJT’s condition of sincerity, voters’ preferences with respect to possible outcomes of the vote are juxtaposed to (disinterestedly held) beliefs about the truth of the matter at hand (4.3.1, p. 46-47). Priorities, on the other hand, are described as meta-values, ordering the respective weight of different normative commitments in deliberation (13.3., p. 205-207).

ETD’s enumeration of the different categories that factor in democratic decision-making is itself unproblematic - we may well accept *facts*, *values*, *preferences* and *priorities* as important deliberative concepts. The problem, however, arises when we consider the real-life examples of democratic deliberation and decision-making - events such as referenda, parliamentary and presidential elections, and their associated campaigns. I consider it obvious enough that, in real-life instances of democratic choice, *facts* never present themselves in their raw, isolated form - no electorate was ever asked a purely factual question (e.g. whether ‘H₂O boils at 100 degrees C at sea level’) nor has it ever faced a purely

¹ I extrapolate these four categories from the discussion in ETD’s Chapters 4, 13, and 14.

ethical question.² The fact/value distinction is itself notoriously ‘leaky’ (Gorski 2017) - facts and values do not simply subsist alongside each other, adjacent to priorities and preferences, rolling and colliding like balls on the pool table. Rather, they permeate and colour each other’s representation. The value/preference distinction is even more porous. If the critique of ideology - i.e. a line of thought spanning from Marx, Mannheim and Gramsci to their ‘radical democratic’ heirs (Laclau and Mouffe, Connolly and Žižek) - has one common *motif*, it is that ideological positions are never held *disinterestedly*, and that perceptions of individual interests are never ideologically uninformed. In this sense, the fact that ever so often our principles align with our wallets does not discredit the notion of principled belief as much as much as testify to the inseparability of beliefs and preferences as analytical categories.

To borrow an idea from frame analysis, the point is not that facts are *irrelevant* or meaningless, but that they take on their meaning only when embedded in broader discursive systems (Gamson et al. 1992). The same point applies to values, preferences, priorities and any other category that we may recognize as relevant to deliberation. A theoretical articulation of such an overarching discursive system would, in my view, take ETD’s discussion of democratic deliberation one step forward.

1.2 Reasoning and epistemic democracy - instrumental and communicative action

The notion that democratic processes might possess unparalleled truth-tracking potential invites us to define, at the very outset, the kind of reasoning to which such truth-tracking exercise would properly belong. Democratic electorates, we are told, are good at identifying, on the basis of available evidence, the correct (or, at any rate, the *optimal*) option on the ballot. Good in what sense? Sherlock Holmes is good at solving the mystery of a murder by investigating evidence and interrogating witnesses. Socrates is good at postulating a theory of morality by debating his interlocutors. Both men are famed exemplars of intellectual prowess of deductive excellence, yet the respective types of reasoning they exemplify differ substantially from each other.

We can approach this distinction by way of a line of thought originally articulated by Horkheimer and Adorno, and later developed more fully by Habermas. In their “Dialectic of Enlightenment” (1944/2007), Adorno and Horkheimer distinguish between ‘instrumental rationality’ - a kind of reasoning paradigmatic of the Enlightenment, interested in determining the most efficient means for achieving given ends (all in service of the broader purpose of furthering man’s ability to predict, control and dominate over nature) - and ‘objective rationality’, or the kind of reasoning associated with metaphysical theorizing, concerned with establishing ends, grounding truth and meaning. Adorno and Horkheimer’s thesis is worked out in more sophistication by Habermas, who in his “Theory of Communicative Action” (1984) (henceforth, TCA) makes the crucial distinction between two basic modes of human interaction in the social world, namely instrumental/strategic action

² Admittedly, issues such as abortion or the death penalty come close to being qualifiable as ‘purely ethical’, but even in these cases non-normative, instrumental aspects of the matter are considerable.

and communicative action. According to Habermas, instrumental/strategic action is action performed as an exercise of instrumental rationality, that is, of a calculation of the optimal means of actualizing a predetermined individual goal. Communicative action, on the other hand, is action oriented towards the mutual recognition of ‘validity claims’, that is, action performed to the end of reaching consensus among members of a community about the inherent desirability, reasonableness and worthiness of pursuit of some goals (TCA, pp. 8-23).

In its account of democratic deliberation and electoral choice, ETD seems all but exclusively concerned with instrumental/strategic action. Tracking those ‘plain brute facts of the world’ in which ETD is interested is a *par excellence* exercise in instrumental/strategic rationality (19.1, p. 305). When their epistemic capacities are discussed, democratic electorates are spoken of as though they were made up of scientists and detectives, weighing the forensic evidence at hand - indeed, electorates and juries are treated as deliberative bodies of a similar kind, engaged in roughly the same work, namely, in establishing the truth of the matter.

In my view, such an account does not do justice to the phenomenon of political deliberation. Political thinking is not instrumental thinking - not exclusively, not even predominantly. There is a fundamental difference between the respective tasks of juries and electorates, i.e. between ascertaining the facts of the case and ascertaining what the public interest is. Ballot papers are not test sheets. Individuals do not enter the domain of communal deliberation with a pre-social, predetermined set of personal values, beliefs and desires, and vote for the optimal political means of achieving these normative and utilitarian ends. Rather, when a community goes to the polls, it casts its verdict on competing ‘validity claims’, and, in so doing, decides what kind of community it wants to be. Hence, following Habermas, I identify communicative action as the kind of rationality that obtains when a democratic polity partakes in deliberation; in that setting, instrumental/strategic action can be construed as ultimately parasitic upon communicative action.

In view of the two points of critique developed in this Section, the task at hand can be summarized thusly - we need to situate the project of epistemic democracy within an overarching model of electoral deliberation, one that orders the various deliberative categories featured by ETD in a way that acknowledges the centrality of communicative action in democratic decision-making processes.

Section II A NARRATIVE MODEL OF ELECTORAL DELIBERATION

2.1 What this election is *really* about - the under-determinacy of electoral propositions

The theoretical account that I wish to propose relies on the notion of *electoral propositions*. By ‘electoral proposition’ I have in mind the subject-matter of democratic decision-making, i.e. the concrete question put before a democratic electorate on the occasion of an election or referendum, such as appears on the ballot. To refer to two of ETD’s oft-cited

cases - ‘that the UK should leave the European Union’ or ‘that Donald Trump/Hillary Clinton should be elected President of the US’ are electoral propositions in my understanding of the term.

As the ETD reminds us, CJT presupposes that, in a given electoral situation, all the voters vote on the same proposition (ETD, 4.6.2, p. 63). However, that is not to say that all the voters understand the meaning of the proposition in question in exactly the same way - voters may be faced with the identical text on the ballot, but will have differing ideas about what the question is. The meaning of electoral propositions is *eo ipso* under-determined – every electoral proposition can reasonably be understood in more than one way, and democratic deliberation on electoral proposition ‘X’ always proceeds against the backdrop of a plurality of interpretations of what ‘X’ is *really* about. For instance, the meaning of the electoral proposition ‘that the UK should leave the European Union’ has been interpreted in *at least* two relevant ways, namely, as asking ‘whether the UK would be better off outside of the EU’ or, alternatively ‘whether the UK should reclaim its sovereignty from Brussels’.

A useful device for conceptualizing this interpretative act vis-a-vis electoral propositions can be found in Michael Freeden’s notion of *decontestation*, developed in his theory of ideology (1998) (2003). In Freeden’s view, it is typical of political ideologies to attempt to remove from contestation the meaning of the concepts they employ by selecting, out of the innumerable ways the meaning of a given concept may be construed, one specific conception. In this sense, for an ideology to announce “this is what justice means” or “this is what democracy entails” is to *decontest*, on part of that ideology, the (ideology-specific) meaning of ‘justice’ and ‘democracy’ (2003, p. 55). In a similar vein, how a voting demographic will choose to interpret the meaning of the electoral proposition at hand - e.g. whether, in the case of the Brexit vote, it will associate the meaning of ‘leaving the European Union’ with the notion of reclaiming sovereignty, or with economic prosperity - is fundamentally informed by that demographic’s ideological perspective.

Another way to approach the electoral propositions’ inherent under-determinacy is to observe that, on the public policy plane, the totality of political, socio-economic and cultural effects that could be credibly postulated as being the possible outcomes of the adoption of a given public policy or set of policies can never be enumerated upfront. For one, contemporary societies are so integrated, and their complex economic, legal and political systems so interdependent, that the effects of any public policy, however narrow in intent, scope and application, are sure to reverberate throughout the social world in innumerable ways. Even where the most programmatic, innocuous, seemingly self-contained policy proposals are concerned - e.g. the 2020 Swiss referendum on the ratification of the 2019 amendment to the federal Law on Hunting - a team of policy experts will always be able to credibly postulate a list of said policy’s likely legal, economic and socio-cultural consequences that is simply too lengthy to present in any public forum. For this reason, any argument that could be offered, in the context of an electoral campaign, in support (or in opposition) of policy proposal ‘X’ - a proposal implied by electoral proposition ‘X’ - is

necessarily selective in its assessment of the relevant policy outcomes. Such a selection constitutes the interpretative judgment of ‘what this policy/set of policies is *really* about’.

The inherent under-determinacy of electoral propositions is what makes the work of democratic electorates fundamentally different from the work of juries, or from exercises in collectively guessing the number of jellybeans in a jar. In a not insignificant sense, the meaning of electoral propositions that present themselves in real-life deliberative situations is socially constructed, and at least partly informed by what voters think these propositions mean (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). In that sense, the electoral process is an interpretative process, concerned with *decontesting* the meaning of an electoral proposition and establishing ‘what this election is *really* about’. The account which I wish to propose seeks to encapsulate this interpretative and semiotic dimension of democratic elections.

2.2 Elections as storytelling contests - why narrative matters in electoral deliberation

Any theoretical articulation of the interpretative dimension of electoral deliberation will necessarily depend on the way the deliberative process is understood. Deliberative democracy, as Boswell notes, has traditionally identified ‘reasons’ as the principal currency of deliberation - the deliberative process is assumed proceed by way of “the give and take of reasons”, with Habermas’s ‘ideal speech situation’ is posited as the idealized standard of reasoned discussion whose *logos* is ‘the forceless force of the better argument’ (2013, p. 628). From a traditional deliberative democratic perspective, then, this interpretative aspect of electoral deliberation might well be construed as pertaining to the reasoned evaluation of arguments supporting this or that reading of ‘what the present election is *really* about’.

The perspective which I propose is somewhat different. If we accept that elections have a special place in the lives of democracies, I suggest that the kind of deliberation preeminent in electoral processes constitutes its own, sufficiently distinct genre of political discourse - a genre discernable both in terms of thematics and of dynamics. I further propose that, if we are to understand this genre, *narration* might be a more appropriate paradigm than, say, *argumentative discussion*. It is evident enough that, by the standards of Habermas’s ‘ideal speech situation’, the kind of political discourse heard in the context of an election campaign - e.g. a televised debate between the major parties’ nominees on the eve of a presidential election - is a ‘debate’ in name only.³ What are we to make of this gross discrepancy between a real-life phenomenon and its ideal type? The point is not that, in electoral deliberation, the opinion-makers (e.g. politicians, or partisan pundits appearing on talk-shows such as *Crossfire*) are bad debaters, incapable of arguing their case as a good attorney or a policy wonk would - the point is, rather, that in electoral deliberation the *logos* is not argument, but narrative. Hence, instead of seeing them as failures of argumentation, we should instead understand these recognizable forms of political talk that obtain in an electoral context as attempts at narration. Election campaigns, we might say, are fundamentally

³ For a compelling account of just how far these ‘carefully choreographed performances’ fall from a reasoned discussion, see Norton and Goethals (2004).

“storytelling contests” (Engelken-Jorge 2016) and the principal capacity of contemporary opinion-makers is that of a storyteller. Accordingly, an election’s interpretative dimension - the partisan struggle over establishing ‘what this election is *really* about’ - is best conceptualized as a clash of narratives. I therefore propose that *narrative* be identified as the principal ‘currency’ of electoral deliberation.

Such a proposal may sound odd to the deliberative democrat - however, as a cursory glance at narrative’s intellectual history will show, it is hardly unexpected. Namely, by defining postmodernism as incredulity towards grand, totalizing interpretative schemata or ‘meta-narratives’, Lyotard (1984) brought to the fore the function of narrative structures in ordering modernist theoretical understanding. As a result, narrative has steadily mainstreamed, from its initial place in structuralist literary theory to being a key methodological tool in continental social theory. Further developments, such as the crisis of positivism in social science, the post-structuralist reaffirmation of agency, as well as the evident role of storytelling in the dynamics of emancipatory social movements in the 1960’s, have contributed to what is commonly known as the narrative turn in the humanities (Roberts 2006, p. 703). This narrative turn in the humanities - the increased popularity of narrative-based explanatory models in the study of social phenomena across the range of disciplines - has not avoided political science. There has been some interest in theorizing the functional role of narrative in group identity-formation (Patterson and Monroe 1998), its place in social movements (Davis 2012), as well as in considering narrative as a variable in the empirical research on political campaigning (Damore 2004) (2005) (Druckman et al. 2009).

Nonetheless, when it comes to the place of narratives in the theorizing of democratic deliberation and decision-making, we observe that the notion of narrative still “skirts around the edges” of deliberative democratic theory (Boswell 2013, p. 621). Indeed, the proper role and function of narrative in democratic deliberation is almost entirely neglected by the contemporary scholarship on deliberative democracy.⁴ We are thus faced with a curious discrepancy between theory and practice. On the one hand, those who run electoral campaigns for a living, as well as those who actually run in elections - politicians, pundits, pollsters, campaign strategists, speechwriters - all seem to perceive narratives as major communicative and semiotic devices. Yet the preeminent theoretical approach to democratic deliberation has, to date, largely ignored it. Is it not time that theorizing of electoral deliberation acknowledges this obvious gap, and starts paying heed to the real-world relevance of the notion of narratives?

A narrative-based model of electoral deliberation affords an important insight into the place of truth on the campaign trail - pace Arendt’s suggestion that the relevant opposite of ‘truth’ in politics is ‘lying’ (2000), I contend that, in situations of electoral deliberation, the notion of truthfulness is not opposed to the practice of lying, but to the somewhat

⁴ Boswell (2013) and Engelken-Jorge (2016) are rare exceptions.

under-theorized notion of spinning.⁵ Unlike lying, spinning is essentially an interpretative practice - specifically, a deceptive narrative practice. The spin-doctor's task is not to fabricate evidence and affirm false propositions, but to twist the facts so as to construct a narrative that serves her client's interest. Here we recall Stanley's account of propaganda as "the employment of a political ideal against itself" (2016, p. XIII). Just as an utterance can carry that elusive self-defeating falseness that makes it propagandistic while consisting of claims that are true - e.g. pronouncing "There are Muslims among us" where there in fact are (pp. 41-43) - a spin does not lose any of its defining deceptiveness if none of the statements that constitute it are untrue. Where deception in electoral narratives is concerned, the paradigmatic practice is spinning, not lying.

2.3 What is a narrative - its features, conception, typology, and a new distinct subtype

If the methodological and explanatory appeal of narratives in the study of electoral deliberation is indeed strong enough to justify a narrative-based model, then it is time to specify what exactly we mean by the terms, and which of the myriad conceptions is most pertinent to the task at hand.

Granted, there are obvious difficulties involved in trying to make sense of a notion that, in the words of Barthes, is omnipresent in its infinite variety of forms - a notion that "like life itself, it is there, international, transhistorical, transcultural" (1975, p. 237). This is not to imply a shortage of succinct formulations - narrative, we are told, consists of "a generic telling of a connected temporal sequence of particular actions taken by, and particular events which happen to, agents" (Clark 2018, p. 374); a core feature of this temporal sequence is that it is *structured*, "shaped, organised and coloured", in a certain way according to a certain *perspective* (Goldie 2012, p. 2). In this sense, the structure and content of narratives is reflective of agency, which makes them "*intentional-communicative artefacts*" (Currie 2010, pp. 1-24). As far as one-sentence descriptions go, for the purposes of this discussion a simple textbook definition will do - narratives are textual representations of *stories*, and stories, in turn, are mental representations of a world composed of characters/agents and objects that undergoes not fully predictable changes, either as a result of accidents or of deliberate actions that reflect goals, plans, or emotions (*Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (RENT) 2005, p. 347-348).

However, sketching a narrative model of electoral deliberation demands a more detailed specification of the select components of narratives that are relevant to their role in election campaigns. To this end, Bruner's analysis of the features of narratives (1999) is particularly useful. Narratives, we are told, are *diachronic*, i.e. they are plot-like accounts linking together events that occur over time (1999, p. 6). They centre around *protagonists* who are intentional, choice-making agents (i.e. not blind, de-personalized historical/natural

⁵ The only two works that offer book-length treatment on the phenomenon of spinning are Schaffner and Sellers's analysis of the function of framing in political debates (2009) and Sellers's analysis of the role of spinning in contemporary U.S. politics (2009).

forces) (p. 7). While relying on archetypical scripts and story arcs, they cannot be entirely predictable, and invariably feature a breach of conventional expectation (pp. 11-13). Since “a breach [of conventional expectation] presupposes a norm”, narratives are inherently normative (pp. 15-16). Importantly, narratives exhibit “hermeneutic composability” - the adequate paradigm for describing the way we relate to them is not ‘information processing’ but *interpretation*, with the meanings of the whole and of its constituent components interdependent in a way similar to that between a musical composition and its notes (pp. 7-11).

Now, it is commonly acknowledged that the notion of narrative connotes a ‘fuzzy set’ of properties that does not easily lend itself to classical, *per genus et differentiam* conceptualization (Jannidis 2007, p. 38) (Ryan 2007, p. 28). Following Clark (2018), I think narrative is best conceptualized as what Lakoff (1987) (1990), and later Collier and Mahon (1993) would call a radial concept. Radial concepts encompass a ‘full’ central subtype, which contains a complete list of a concept’s differentiating components and corresponds to the concept’s perfect prototype (e.g. ‘mother’ as traditionally construed), as well as a number of non-central, diminished subtypes missing at least one of the components contained by the ‘core’ category (e.g. ‘stepmother’, ‘surrogate mother’, etc.). I see the concept of narrative as exhibiting such a radial structure, with the kinds of narrative most relevant to this discussion - non-fictional, political, electoral narratives - featuring some, but not necessarily all of the aforementioned commonly recognized components of narrativity.

Following Cohn (1999), we can distinguish between fictional and non-fictional narratives on the bases of whether the narrative’s content - its story and the way the story is told - is anchored in an external reference (i.e. a state of affairs independent of the content of narration).⁶ Owing to its origins in literary theory, the study of narratives or narratology has largely concerned itself with fictional narratives and their various different genres (i.e. tragedy, farce, travel saga, epistolary novel, bildungsroman, etc.), paying comparatively little attention to non-fictional narratives. And when non-fictional narratives have been studied seriously, the main focus has been on theorizing the function of narrative in historiographic writing (Ricoeur 1990) (White 1987). Accordingly, the subject of non-fictional narratives that are *not* primarily historical has hitherto been neglected. One such neglected class of non-fictional narratives are *political* narratives.

A political narrative may thus be defined succinctly as “chronological account that helps actors to make sense of and argue about a political issue” (Boswell, p. 622). However, as pointed out by Shenhav (2006), a definition based on content (i.e. ‘political issues’) runs the danger of conceptual stretching, as any issue - and hence any narrative - can be approached as a political issue. I therefore wish to introduce a more narrow, distinct, if to date entirely unrecognized kind of political narrative, namely, the *electoral narrative*.

⁶ While the precise topic of Cohn’s discussion is the distinction between fictional and *historical* narratives, I believe his point applies to all non-fictional narratives.

2.4 The 'electoral narrative' - introducing a distinct subtype of political narrative

Electoral narratives are a distinct class of political narratives structured around an often dichotomous choice that the audience is invited to make in an electoral capacity. Electoral narratives play an essentially interpretative role vis-a-vis electoral propositions - they offer a formulation of the fork-in-the-road choice implied by the electoral proposition in question, thereby answering the question of 'what this election is *really* about'.

Electoral narratives exhibit some of the features of narrativity outlined in the preceding subsection. They are *diachronic*, plot-like accounts linking together events in time (e.g. 'over the decades, we've been giving up control of our laws and borders to unelected bureaucrats in Brussels'). They feature *protagonists* by demarcating the different political actors along the lines of 'us' and 'them' through the practice that Frey (1985) terms 'actor designation' (e.g. 'the British people', 'immigrants', 'Remainer elites'), and archetypical *scripts* fit for a modern-day morality play (e.g. simple folk's common sense vs. the arrogant but deluded experts, rural virtue vs. cosmopolitan nihilism, democracy vs. power). However, unlike in other kinds of narrative, the centerpiece of an electoral narrative is the rendering of an electoral proposition's meaning into a *choice*, whereby the audience is invited to complete the plot (e.g. 'do we want to take back control over our country?').

The structure of electoral narratives resembles that which scholars of social movements tend to ascribe to frames. Central to the contemporary study of social movements, 'frames' are "cognitive schemata, stored in memory, for the interpretative task of making sense of presenting situations" (Johnson 1995, p. 217). These cognitive schemata allow individuals to "locate, perceive, identify and label" (Goffman 1974) - in the dynamics of social movements, this function translates into the task of "attributing blame, identifying solutions, and motivating participation" (Della Porta and Parks 2014, p. 22). We can say that frames (1) diagnose a particular systemic injustice that needs to be remedied, (2) propose how the situation can be changed through collective action, and (3) draw the battle lines by demarcating 'us' and 'them' as two antagonistic actors, clashing on the identified issue (Polletta 1998). Importantly, the efficacy of frames as persuasive devices is said to depend on three factors - clarity, empirical credibility, and congruence with potential adherents' beliefs and broad cultural understandings (Polletta, 1998) (Polletta and Ho, 2006). Similarly, electoral narratives can be said to contain (1) a diagnostic component, which problematizes the *status quo* so as to identify the grievance that require redress, (2) a fork-in-the-road presentation of the different possible courses of action (vis-a-vis the diagnosed issues) that could be chosen by voting in a specific way, (3) a contractual component, featuring a promise of what will happen if the electorate supports the narrators' advocated course of action.

Importantly, electoral narratives seek to exert on the electorate what psychologists call a 'framing effect' - in an ambiguous stance towards the audience, they posit a choice which is not really a choice. On the one hand, electoral narratives are voluntaristic - they tend to ascribe absolute agency to the electorate (in Reagan's words, "a time for choosing!"),

exalting the historical importance of the choice at hand (e.g. “the most important election in our lifetimes!”). On the other hand, they have strong deterministic undertones - the choice is always framed so that the ‘right’ alternative is heavily implied (in Obama’s words, “do we participate in a politics of cynicism, or do we participate in a politics of hope?”), and the character of the polity is depicted in such a way that it is obvious which choice would be its true expression.

Section III THE VALIDITY OF ELECTORAL NARRATIVES

3.1 Why we need a truth-like category in theorizing electoral narratives

In the proposed narrative model of electoral deliberation, deciding how to vote in an election is not a matter of instrumental/strategic evaluation of pros and cons as much as it is a matter of deciding which story is more compelling. But if elections are essentially storytelling contests in which the competing political actors design and communicate narratives that aim to impress upon the electorate specific, strategically formulated interpretations of the electoral choice at hand - ‘what this election is *really* about’ - where in this model might we hope to locate the notion of *truth*?

In line with its dominant focus on fictional forms of narration, the study of narratives has rarely dealt with the concept of truth outside the context of fiction (*RENT*, pp. 621-622). For this reason, as Shenhav observes, there is a widespread assumption that narrative methods inevitably involve a kind of radical relativism inimical to the very notion of truth and truthfulness (2006, p. 246).

Where electoral narratives are concerned, this assumption is not entirely unwarranted. By virtue of their structure as analytical categories, electoral narratives are not hospitable to truth-like predicates construed in terms of an objective ‘Capital T’ truth. Namely, the structural function of electoral propositions in electoral narratives is equivalent to that of ‘historical facts’ in historical narratives, as theorized by White (1987) and Ricoeur (1990) - both serve as external references. And just as historical narratives are not neutral ‘containers’ of historical ‘facts’ whose function is merely representative (White, pp. 1-25), the inherent under-determinacy of electoral propositions assures that, pace Berger and Luckmann, electoral narratives be at least partly constitutive of the electoral propositions’ meaning. However, the nature of the external reference differs greatly between historical and electoral narratives. Whereas the notion of ‘historical fact’ - e.g. that Charles I was beheaded at Whitehall in 1649 - is ultimately anchored in a concrete occurrence whose ontological status is independent of its historical representation (e.g. the event of said person’s execution as it took place), electoral propositions - statements such as ‘that the UK should (not) exit the European Union’ - make no equivalent claim of corresponding to a specific, clearly identifiable external referent.

For this reason, in the case of electoral narratives the pursuit of an evaluative standard will necessarily face the dilemma of the hermeneutic circle - the (im)possibility of evaluating

the truth of one interpretation solely by reference to another. A possible way out of this interpretative conundrum might be glimpsed in Freeden's theory of ideology. If the *decontestation* of a term's meaning is an entirely arbitrary affair, would it not follow that any ideology-specific interpretation of a term's meaning is just as legitimate as the next one? Here Freeden positions his own approach somewhere in the middle of the road between the 'objectivist' and 'relativist' positions, the former claiming that there is only one correct *decontestation*, the latter claiming that all *decontestations* are equally (in)valid (Freeden 1998, pp. 91-95). In our pursuit of a truth-like evaluative standard for electoral narratives, we can adopt the same broad strategy.

At any rate, the fact that the notion of truth, especially in its 'Capital T' variant, may seem out of place in the context of electoral narratives should not discourage attempts to carve out a niche for it. If, as ETD notes, there has long been a tendency to view the pursuit of 'Capital T' truth in politics as a dangerous and latently tyrannical affair (19.2, pp. 305-307) - if truth, in Arendt's words, has a despotic character in the political realm (2000, p. 555) - it is vital we also affirm that the nihilistic disavowal of any notion of truth in political thinking is potentially just as dangerous. The instrumental and semiotic value of truth is too great for it to be forsworn by any credible model of deliberation.

Where truth's instrumental value is concerned, I follow Bernard Williams's argument about the function of 'truthfulness' and its two 'Virtues' - Accuracy (grounding one's beliefs in evidence) and Sincerity (saying what one genuinely believes) - as the conditions of possibility for *trust* (2002, pp. 84-88, 123-126). As trust, in turn, is the *sine qua non* of societal cooperation, the notion of truthfulness is indispensable to the existence of society and, by extension, social theory. We might further add, with Habermas, that the notion of truth can be seen as necessary for the very idea of communicative action. The Habermasian point is simply that "we wouldn't be exchanging reasons in the first place if we did not believe that there was something to figure out, whether we call this something the truth, the right, or the correct, just, or socially useful answer" (Estlund and Landemore 2018, p. 113).

3.2 Truthful if not truth-apt - theorizing the 'validity' of electoral narratives

Electoral narratives belong to a class of performative speech-acts to which the standard truth-conditional account of meaning is inapplicable - an electoral narrative's meaning is not exhausted by the truth conditions of its propositional content. Accordingly, electoral narratives do not possess 'truth-value' in the sense of their propositional content corresponding to an objective state of affairs. To be sure, electoral narratives encompass truth-apt components that are truth-apt (e.g. factual assertions, such as that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction), but they themselves are not. Hence the idea of articulating a notion of *truthfulness* that is ascribable to electoral narratives does not anticipate postulating the category of 'truth' in any correspondence-theory-of-truth sense, but rather finding its functional equivalent.

A functional equivalent of ‘truth’ vis-a-vis electoral narratives is a stand-in category that could plausibly serve as an evaluative standard of *correctness* in a minimally non-subjective, non-relativistic way. How should such a category be construed?

In Cohen’s view (1986), epistemic democracy assumes that democratic decisions have a fully independent standard of ‘correctness’ - to evaluate the epistemic quality of democratic decision-making it is necessary to employ “an account justice or the common good that is *independent* of current consensus and the outcomes of votes” (p. 34). Cohen’s idea is representative of what Mouffe identifies as the ‘universalist-rationalist’ approach, according to which the standards of ‘correctness’ in democratic decision-making are seen as being grounded in principles that are themselves independent of historico-cultural context - principles that would be chosen by rational subjects in idealized conditions (2000, pp. 63-65).

Recent contributions to epistemic democracy tend to relax this universalist-rationalist conception of ‘correctness’ as an objective, context-independent category grounded in transcendental principles of rationality, in favor of what, following Mouffe, we might call the contextualist view (2000, pp. 64-67). Estlund and Landemore, for instance, propose that a ‘standard of correctness’ be construed in such a way as to encompass not just the “objective truth of the matter”, but also criteria that are “more intersubjective, culturally-dependent, and temporary construct (about more socially constructed facts or moral questions)” (2018, p. 113). This is a proposal that the ETD endorses (1.6.3, p. 11), and one which the present discussion aims to push to its fuller conclusions. Namely, what we are after is a notion that finds its place within a pragmatic conception of meaning expressed by Habermas, who claims that the primary aim or “inherent telos” of speech-acts is to establish intersubjective consensus (*rationales Einverständnis*) (TCA, p. 287). For the purposes of this discussion, we might term that pragmatic truth-like notion - the functional equivalent of ‘truth’ in electoral narratives - *validity*.

In postulating this category, I draw from Habermas’s notion of *validity claims* (*Geltungsanspruch*), i.e. a wide spectrum of justifiable claims that constitute communicative action, which is richer and broader in scope than the class of empirical truth-claims. Simply put, to assert the ‘validity’ of some claim is to assert “that said claim merits the addressee’s acceptance because it is justified or true in some sense, which can vary according to the sphere of validity and dialogical context” (Bohman and Rehg, 2017). Judgments about the ‘validity’ of electoral narratives, then, can be understood as belonging to the class of *Geltungsanspruch*. Habermas identifies three distinct ‘validity claims’ involved in any speech-act - a claim to sincerity, to moral rightness and to representational adequacy (TCA, p. 275). In their own peculiar way, electoral narratives make all three claims. In what follows, the notion of validity is explained both in terms of the properties of validity judgments and by way of describing the factors that indicate a narrative’s validity.

3.3 Validity judgments and criteria for validity evaluation in electoral narratives

For Donald Trump's supporters to take his words "seriously, not literally" in 2016 (ETD 21.7.3, p. 351) meant that, despite all the lies he regularly told on the campaign trail, they nonetheless felt that there was something *valid* - something that rang *true* - in Trump's overall narrative. In other words, Trump's supporters made a validity judgment. I attempt to theoretically articulate the structure of these judgments in the following five points:

- 1) Validity judgments are non-transitive from part to whole - the attribute of validity is predicated only upon the narrative as a whole, and not to any of its components. A narrative may thus be judged *valid* even if it features some falsehoods.
- 2) Validity judgments are comparative, not absolute - the validity of a given narrative can only be assessed in comparison to the validity of other competing narratives.
- 3) Validity judgments tend to be negative, not affirmative - assessments of the validity of electoral narrative 'A' in comparison with narrative 'B' are usually formulated in a way that asserts that 'A' is *less valid* than 'B', rather than 'B' being *more valid* than 'A'. This is due to the nature of the criteria for the evaluation of validity, as will be subsequently explained.
- 4) Validity judgments presuppose judgments on their conditions of possibility - judgments of validity contain implicit judgments that the state of society is such that validity judgments can be made. This point will be elaborated in Section IV.
- 5) Validity judgments are neither subjective nor objective, but intersubjective. They are not confined to implying correspondence to a mind-independent 'state of the world', nor do they renounce all ground beyond the individual subject's own perspective. Judgments that a narrative is 'valid' assert that there should be (intersubjective) agreement about the validity of the narrative in question.

If these five points constitute an acceptable preliminary sketch of validity judgments, we can identify four factors that bear on the voters' evaluation of the validity of electoral narratives, namely: *facticity*, *coherence*, *relevance* and *promise*. To be clear, these four categories are not the components, but rather *indicators* of an electoral narrative's validity - validity is contingent upon, but not reducible to these four properties. What follows is a brief description of the four criteria in question.

- 1) The narrative's *facticity*, or the accuracy of empirical assertions which the narrative employs. Facticity pertains to those components of a political narrative that are truth-apt (in the sense of a correspondence theory of truth). Not all truth-apt propositions on which

a narrative relies are weighted equally towards facticity - some failures of facticity are more compromising than others.⁷

- 2) The narrative's *coherence*, or the logical validity of the narrative's argument. Electoral narratives, after all, are argumentative - their idiosyncratic structure gives form to content that encompasses what we commonly refer to by political argumentation. In this sense, narratives are susceptible to standards of coherence. A coherent narrative's conclusions can be credibly said to follow from its premises. Unlike facticity, coherence is predicated upon the narrative as a whole. A narrative can lack coherence without lacking facticity.
- 3) The narrative's *relevance*, or whether it can be reasonably said to offer a *plausible* interpretation of an electoral proposition. As previously explained, electoral narratives are inevitably anchored (albeit loosely) in electoral propositions.⁸ For instance, it was *plausible* for the 'Leave' campaign's narrative to claim that the UK's Brexit referendum was really about whether the UK would take back control from the EU. It would not have been plausible for the Tory candidate's campaign in the 2019 Newport-West parliamentary by-election to claim that the election at hand is about the UK taking back control from the EU. Hence a narrative may be both factually accurate and coherent without being *relevant*.
- 4) The narrative's *promise*, or the degree to which political actors that find legitimation in a narrative (i.e. the winning party/candidate) manage to deliver on the contract offered to the electorate. The electoral narrative's *promise* is a vision of a better society promoted as the outcome of the advocated course of action (e.g. GOP's 1994 "Contract with America"). The most relevant dimension of a narrative's *promise* is what we colloquially term 'false promise' - deceptiveness inherent in a narrative's normative vision of the future. A narrative's promise can only be credibly adjudicated *ex post facto*.

It is obvious enough that none of the posited criteria for evaluating the validity of electoral narratives are quantifiable. What is less obvious is that, where validity judgments are made in real-life electoral deliberation, these criteria mostly function as standards of negation. Electoral competition is a polemical affair - opposing campaigns fact-check each others' claims, scrutinize the coherence and relevance of each other's narratives, and cast the other side's promises as false and deceptive. As a result, voters are typically more aware of evidence *against* the facticity, coherence, relevance and promise of an electoral contender's narrative than of evidence in favor of it - hence property (3) of validity judgments.

⁷ ETD captures this point in its differentiation of the made-up anecdotes that Reagan employed to illustrate his points from the fabrications that Trump used as evidence for his claims (21.7.2, pp. 350-51).

⁸ See 3.1.

Section IV CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITY FOR VALIDITY JUDGMENTS

4.1 Lifeworld and ideology - validity in context

The intersubjective character of validity stipulated by property (5) demands that a comprehensive description of this category features an account of its conditions of possibility. Electoral narratives are presented and received in a socially defined context. Accordingly, validity judgments - comparative evaluations of the validity of competing narratives, as per property (2) - are always made against the backdrop of this context. How, exactly, does this context bring to bear on the possibility of validity judgments?

Let us begin by noting that electoral narratives are not comprehensive political treatises that work their way down to their philosophical first principles - they are unoriginal, typically shallow pieces of political discourse that rely on established patterns of cultural understanding in order to convey their meaning. Hence, in tailoring their message to specific voting demographics, electoral narratives tend to “skip” a lot of theoretical ground, trusting their target audience to fill in the blanks by themselves. Importantly, electoral narratives make a number of *ontological*, *historiographic* and *hermeneutical* assumptions.

When populist politicians talk about the corrupt establishment and the biased media, they do not need to explicate a populist social ontology according to which the ‘Elite’ and the ‘People’ form two coherent and mutually antagonistic building blocks of society. Such theorizing would be redundant, as voters who are receptive to populist ideas already tend to perceive the social world in these terms, albeit most often in an intuitive, pre-theoretical way.

Likewise, when at one of his rallies in the Rust Belt Donald Trump vows to “make America great again”, he does not owe his ex-blue-collar audience more than a brief historiographic sketch (e.g. the story of how America’s leaders spearheaded the course of globalization that closed factories at home and impoverished the working class). Again, elaboration would be unnecessary, since Trump’s audience is sufficiently familiar with the story, and finds it plausible.

A similar dynamics obtains on the hermeneutical plane. Consider the radically different connotations of term ‘privilege’ in Trump and Clinton’s respective stump speeches - while in Trump’s narrative ‘privilege’ pertains to socio-economic status as the attribute of cosmopolitan ‘Elites’, in Clinton’s narrative ‘privilege’ is the property of an ethnic group, as in ‘white privilege’. With respect to the 2016 US presidential election, the same can be argued for “progress”, “freedom”, “corruption”, “love” and “hate”. Following Mouffe, we may invoke the Wittgensteinian view that “to have agreement in opinions there must first be agreement on the language used and this [...] implies agreement in forms of life (*Lebensform*)” (1999, p. 749). In this sense, we can say that ideologically opposed electoral narratives (e.g. Trump’s and Clinton’s) constitute two different (ideological) ‘language games’, which do not share the same language of deliberation.

How can we conceptualize this embeddedness of electoral narratives within broader frameworks of meaning? The backdrop against which electoral narratives are received and evaluated can be understood by reference to what Habermas calls ‘lifeworld’. It connotes “the background resources, contexts, and dimensions of social action that enable actors to cooperate on the basis of mutual understanding: shared cultural systems of meaning, institutional orders that stabilize patterns of action, and personality structures acquired in family, church, neighborhood, and school” (Bohman and Rehg, 2017). Lifeworld and ‘system’ are the two spheres of sociality that form a dualistic model of social ontology described in TCA. In that model, *lifeworld* functions as the medium of symbolic and cultural reproduction and knowledge transmission in society (Finlayson 2005, pp. 52-53), and is the domain wherein all communicative action takes place. Importantly, *lifeworld* for Habermas constitutes the grounds for the possibility of ‘validity claims’ - we can observe, with Seemann (2004), that for Habermas ‘truth’ in the context of communicative action is really ‘truth-in-the-lifeworld’.

Lifeworld, then, provides the fundamental condition of possibility for the emission and reception of narratives - outside of this context, validity judgments cannot be made. However, given the specificity of the category of validity as it pertains to electoral narratives, to posit lifeworld *per se* as an explanatory framework is to cast the net too wide. We need to narrow our focus, and identify a specific dimension of the lifeworld that is most relevant to the kind of meaning that electoral narratives communicate. That dimension, I submit, is ideology. When electoral narratives make their aforementioned ontological, hermeneutical and historiographic assumptions, they proceed with a certain view of the horizon of ideological understanding that their audience inhabits. Accordingly, when these ontological, hermeneutical and historiographic assumptions are received (with more or less acceptance) by the voting audience, this again is done from an ideologically demarcated vantage point. Hence, the task at hand to stipulate the specifically ideological conditions in which ‘validity’ may properly be ascribed to electoral narratives.

4.2 Hegemony and the conditions of possibility of validity judgments

For the judgments of the validity of electoral narratives to be possible, two conditions must jointly obtain with respect to the ideological dimension of a society’s lifeworld. Namely, (1) there must exist a sufficient degree of ideological consensus within the electorate as a whole, and (2) there must exist a sufficient degree of ideological overlap between the competing electoral narratives. If both (1) and (2) are not the case, electoral narratives may well be assessed in terms of persuasiveness, but judgments of their ‘validity’ cannot be made.

The first condition concerns the ideological make-up of a society’s lifeworld. I follow Freedman (1998) (2003) in understanding political ideologies as interpretative frameworks composed of clusters of *decontested* concepts and structured around a narrow set of ‘core’ concepts. The way in which these core concepts are *decontested* informs the *decontestation* of an adjacent set of concepts, which, at the periphery of an ideology’s conceptual structure,

translate into more or less comprehensive sets of ideology-specific answers to the political questions of the day. In this sense, the degree of across-the-board ideological uniformity in an electorate at a given point in time can be represented as the degree of alignment between the conceptual structures and practices of *decontestation* employed by society's various ideological demographics (e.g. to how similar my ideology-specific conception of 'freedom' is to yours), as well as the degree of consensus on fundamental policy assumptions (e.g. should there be an income tax?). The strength of a society's ideological consensus manifests itself in the adherence of political actors to the proverbial 'rules of the game' that demarcate the scope of *legitimate* political suggestions and political conduct (Higley and Burton 1989, p. 19). Hence, for instance, if a society's ideological make-up was such that half of its voting public were progressive liberals, and the other half were textbook fascist (let us imagine that each member of these blocks approximate their respective ideologies' ideal-types) - it would not be possible to make a comparative validity judgment of the Progressive Liberal Party and Fascist Party's electoral narratives, as there would be no minimal ideological consensus in society.

The second condition pertains to the ideological profile of the competing electoral narratives. Recalling Mouffe's Wittgensteinian view of democratic deliberation as the agonistic contestation of ideological camps that partake in different 'language games' (1999) (2005), I suggest that, for a comparative evaluation of the validity of electoral narratives to be possible, there should exist a minimum of mutual intelligibility between their respective 'language games'.⁹ In Freeden's terms, there should be a sufficient degree of ideological overlap between the narratives that are subject to validity judgments. The example of a hypothetical electoral context between a Progressive Liberal Party and a Fascist Party can here be reemployed - validity judgments vis-a-vis these parties' narratives would be impossible, as progressive-liberal and fascist narratives simply do not share sufficient vocabulary.

A useful way of thinking about the conditions of possibility for validity judgments is to identify two opposite states in which a society's ideological landscape may be found - states that, in his account of socio-political transformation, Antonio Gramsci defined as *hegemony* and *organic crisis* (1971). Hegemony, for Gramsci, is leadership by the manufactured consent of the led - where hegemony obtains, the ruling class rules not by the force of the State's oppressive apparatus (i.e. not by 'domination'), but by virtue of an underlying ideological consensus. An organic crisis, on the other hand, is a state in which hegemony breaks, and the ruling class is forced to resort to direct domination through the State (Ibid). Employing the Gramscian paradigm, we can recast hegemony as the state in which the aforementioned conditions (1) and (2) jointly hold - accordingly, in the state of organic crisis, neither holds. Validity judgments, we might say, are possible only in conditions of hegemony.

⁹ For a recent, sophisticated discussion of agonistic pluralism's conception of deliberation, see Paxton (2020).

When assessing the validity on an electoral narrative, can we determine upfront whether the conditions (1) and (2) are being met? We cannot. In the proposed model of electoral deliberation, it is possible for us to be mistaken about the possibility of making validity judgments - we might think, for instance, that in a given socio-cultural context (1) and (2) obtains, only to later change our mind about the properties of that context. However, *when* we make validity judgments, we assume that the conditions of possibility for making that judgment are obtained.

Section V RECASTING THE MAIN IDEA OF EPISTEMIC DEMOCRACY

5.1 Re-thinking the terms of epistemic democracy: some preliminary notes

We are not in a position to revisit the central claims and categories employed by epistemic democracy - as presented in ETD - in light of the narrative model of electoral deliberation explicated in the three preceding Sections. My basic contention is that the overall project of epistemic democracy can be successfully recast, even in such a radically different framework of electoral deliberation. In the proposed model, the epistemic potential of democratic decision-making concerns the relative success of large groups of people in evaluating the validity of competing electoral narratives under suitable conditions.

When it comes to validity judgments, we may say that the three assumptions of the Condorcet's Jury Theorem (CJT) rests - competence, independence, and sincerity (ETD 2.2, pp. 17-19) - still hold with respect to voters in contemporary democracies. To argue this is to suggest that, on average, voters have a better-than-random chance of adequately assessing the facticity, coherence, relevance and promise of an electoral narrative and the conditions thereof, that their individual validity judgments are made with minimal autonomy, and that most of the votes is cast as a result of sincerely held validity judgments.

Clearly, each of these assumptions can be challenged, as they have been in EDT. As an adequate treatment and rebuttal of these challenges would require a book-length discussion, in the present discussion I limit myself to a preliminary statement of what the core terms of epistemic democracy mean in the context of electoral narratives. To that end, I emphasize two categories relevant to the epistemic quality of democratic decision-making - (the crowd's) *wisdom* and *expertise*.

5.2 Re-thinking the multitude's *wisdom* - tracking truths and evaluating narratives

Underlying the project of epistemic democracy is the idea that an analysis of CJT can offer insights in support of the proverbial 'wisdom of the crowds' in democratic decision-making - otherwise, the project might as well have been called the epistemic theory of juries. Now, when attempting to translate insights from CJT into an argument about the multitude's *wisdom*, the epistemic democrat is confronted with the fact that the notion of wisdom is far more complex and nuanced than that of (problem-solving) *intelligence*. In the context of epistemic democracy, this theoretical distinction has received perhaps its most extensive treatment by Landemore (2012, pp. 1-21). In Landemore's view, "wisdom" is not

only a more encompassing and less technical notion than “intelligence”, but, importantly, “whereas intelligence may seem to refer to the here and now, wisdom evokes a larger temporal horizon” (p.7). Wisdom, then, extends beyond the ability to identify the optimal solution to a problem based on available evidence - it is a culturally embedded mode of relating to a given problematic, composed of layers of understanding developed over time and preserved in shibboleths of collective memory such as proverbs, sayings and rules of thumb.

The evaluation of an electoral narrative’s validity, as described in the two preceding Sections, is a far less straightforward and more nuanced affair than the exercise of instrumental reasoning in determining a correct/optimal solution to a given problem. As such, it is the sort of activity in regard to which it is much more appropriate to ascribe the category of *wisdom* than that of *intelligence*.

Let us revisit ETD's postulation of a hypothetical ‘best responder’ - “someone who does the best epistemically that can be done, given the decision situation” (ETD 5.3, p. 77). What is the measure of a hypothetical ‘best responder’ where the evaluation of electoral narratives is concerned? Following our proposed model, a ‘best responder’ might be someone who (1) is informed of what the facts are and can accurately evaluate a narrative’s reliance on *facticity*; (2) manages to see through the campaign’s focus group-tested soundbites and identify whether a narrative contains inherent self-contradictions (and how serious they are); (3) is prudent enough not to fall for empty promises of a shiny future, but can instead correctly predict a ‘false promise’; (4) can tell whether an electoral narrative is at all relevant to the given electoral proposition.

The ideal-typical best responder does not necessarily possess any relevant expertise, nor does she need to be able to articulate, in a theoretically informed way, any judgments on (1), (2), (3) and (4) - they might as well be guided by a ‘gut feeling’. Nonetheless, such a ‘best responder’ would be someone remarkably skilled at separating the wheat from the chaff - someone who knows a lying demagogue when they see one, someone with an aptitude for cutting through the noise and differentiating the sensible from the senseless, someone who, as Frankfurt (2009) would have it, is great at smelling bullshit. How might we qualify such a person? This is essentially a description of someone who is politically *wise*. Recasting the epistemic theory of democracy in light of a narrative model of electoral choice can thus do justice to the original connotation of the idea of “the *wisdom* of the crowds”.

5.3 Re-thinking the elite’s *expertise* - epistocracy vs. noocracy

Recasting the multitude’s epistemic potential as *wisdom* invites us to reconsider the latter constituent of *ETD*'s original opposition between non-experts and experts. With wisdom, rather than expertise, as the central descriptive category with respect to judgments of narrative validity, the elite/non-elite opposition translates not into the distinction between democracy and *epistocracy* (i.e. rule of experts) as discussed by ETD (15.1, pp. 225-228), but

into the distinction between democracy and what, following Plato, we might call *noocracy* (i.e. aristocracy of the wise).

As wisdom and expertise are notions that come from very different domains of discourse, it is unclear how any degree of discipline-specific expertise can translate into the kind of wisdom ascribed to a ‘best responder’. Thus, instead of a body of ‘experts’, our proposed model of electoral choice juxtaposes the multitude to a minority of ‘wise elders’, whose adequate institutional presence is not found in a think-tank or an expert policymaking body, but in more broadly meritocratic institutions such as the Royal Academy of the Italian Senate, the U.S. Supreme Court, or the House of Lords.

Thus construed, the main thrust of epistemic democracy really becomes an indictment not of technocracy, but of *noocracy*. In contemporary political discourse, the noocratic position is most directly expressed by anti-populism. Whereas technocracy assumes that there is only one ‘correct’ policy solution, and that the quality of political decision-making is ultimately derived from the level of technocratic expertise, anti-populism’s epistemic assumptions are wider. In juxtaposing a righteous, enlightened elite to a stupid, susceptible crowd, anti-populism does not necessarily depict the multitude as incompetent/unintelligent, but as essentially *childish*, that is, as lacking in wisdom (Mudde 2017, p. 43-45) (Moffitt 2018, pp. 4-8). In this sense, the argument about the ‘wisdom of the crowds’ in evaluating narratives is fundamentally anti-populist.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, it is important to stress that the present dissertation constitutes merely an initial attempt to imagine the project of epistemic democracy within a narrative-based framework of electoral deliberation. Since the core component of this framework - *narrative* - is itself largely under-theorized in the study of democratic deliberation, the bulk of the discussion was concerned with outlining what a ‘narrative model’ of deliberation means and how a truth-like category of *validity* can be reconciled with it.

As throughout this discussion epistemic democracy was considered in its sophisticated version formulated by Goodin and Spiekermann’s EDT, it is reasonable to suppose that a systematic account of what a ‘narrative turn’ entails for epistemic democracy would require book-length treatment. Nonetheless, the prospect of it opens a productive avenue for future study.

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