



SERRC
Social Epistemology
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>
ISSN: 2471-9560

The Severity of the Information Gap Problem for Epistocracy: On Gibbons's Reply

María Pía Méndez, Universidad Mayor, maria.mendez@umayor.cl

Méndez, María Pía. 2023. "The Severity of the Information Gap Problem for Epistocracy: On Gibbons's Reply." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 12 (10): 47–52.
<https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-8bd>.

Adam Gibbons (2022) holds, in response to my recent paper on epistocracy (Méndez 2022), that the severity of what I identify as a very relevant epistemic problem for epistocracy is overstated. What I call the Information Gap Problem refers to the gap of information that an elite electorate of well-informed citizens would experience, with regards to what epistocrats call ‘ill-informed’ lay citizens’ preferences.

In that paper, I claimed that a group of highly qualified people could be better at determining the *content* of policies to foster general goals, but that this does not mean they could also be able to identify the best *forms* for those policies to be implemented. The form is what I connect to the lived experiences of lay citizens, and an epistocratic arrangement—which equals to distribute political power in accordance with political competence—would exclude the preferred forms of implementation of the ill-informed citizens. That information would thus be out of reach for an elite electorate, and persisting socio economic differences would reduce the overlap between the preferences of the elite and the preferences of ill-informed citizens.

According to Gibbons, it is not clear why such information is so important. Additionally, Gibbons states that the Information Gap Problem would be less of a threat, and even no threat at all, to some types of epistocracy. Finally, from Gibbons’s perspective, there are other more pressing issues for epistocracies that are not properly addressed in my paper, such as the difficulties of assessing political competence, and the risks of abuse in epistocratic arrangements.

Here I will argue that the importance of including preferences from lay citizens comes back to the goal of the epistocratic project, namely, to improve the outcomes of our democracies for everyone. As I state in the paper, lay citizen’s lived experiences are crucial to do so. Relatedly, I will show that all forms of epistocracy are in some way exclusionary, since they do involve restricting the electorate, be it directly or indirectly, which means that no matter the type, they would all be susceptible to the Information Gap Problem. As well, I will briefly address the final objection regarding competence by showing that Gibbons’s worries regarding competence are present and developed in my paper.

The Importance of Lay Citizens’ Preferences

Epistocrats base their arguments on a central diagnosis (Caplan 2007; Somin 2013)¹ which is that our democracies produce bad outcomes largely due to the incapacity of lay citizens to choose the appropriate means to foster their preferences (Brennan 2016; Ahlstrom-Vij 2019). This is what I call the Preferences/ Means Discrepancy (Méndez 2022, 154). In other words, epistocrats deem lay citizens incompetent to identify those means and, therefore, they hold the best way to improve democracy’s outcomes is by implementing some form of restricted electorate.

¹ For relevant discussions see: Brennan 2009; 2011; 2014; 2016; Guerrero 2014; Jeffrey 2018; López-Guerra 2011; 2014; 2020; Mulligan 2018.

In my paper (Méndez 2022), I claim that, even if we grant the epistocratic diagnosis regarding lay people's incapacity to identify the right means to promote their goals, we must acknowledge a similar epistemic shortcoming from a group of well-informed people. Due to persisting inequalities, the group would share socio economic and demographic features that would likely not just reproduce implicit biases, but lack access to lay people's preferences about how to implement policies.

The objection that Gibbons raises to this idea is that it is not really clear why having access to lay citizens' preferences about ways to implement policies is even relevant to begin with. According to Gibbons in my paper I only claim that lay citizens 'can possess good information for general ways to undertake practical projects' (Gibbons, 2022) without providing further arguments to support this affirmation. Likewise, he claims that in fact implementing adequate public policies 'requires substantial knowledge of politically relevant facts' (Gibbons 2022, 3), which is precisely what lay citizens lack. Conversely to what Gibbons holds, I devote part IV of the paper to provide further arguments to support my affirmation. I will briefly go through those ideas here.

First, we need to return to epistocratic projects' main goal, namely, to improve the outcomes of democracies for everyone's benefit. I hold that if the epistocratic project is not aristocratic in inspiration, the improvement of outcomes should be aimed at everyone, and, therefore, should also be connected to all citizens' needs. As stated in my paper (Méndez 2023, 162), a common complaint posed by lay citizens in contemporary democracies is that there is a disconnection between the reality of common citizens and their representatives, which makes them unable to understand their interests and concerns. The Information Gap Problem is related to this complaint in the sense that such perceived disconnection would be reproduced by an elite group of electors:

How we want to implement a policy is inevitably connected with the way in which we live our daily lives. It has less to do with an intellectual process and more to do with the information that comes from lived experiences, where the ones connected to an elite group of citizens would surely differ from those of lay citizens (162).

I do not focus on the lack of overlap between the preferred form of implementation of ill-informed lay citizens versus an elite of electors since other authors—most notably David Estlund's (2008) 'Demographic Objection'—already considers this in detail. It is though quite clear that Gibbons and I strongly disagree about the role that informal knowledge plays for policy making processes. He claims that knowledge about politically relevant facts is more important. However, I am sure he is thinking about laws instead of public policies when he makes this claim. Many public policies in fact include a period during which policymakers gather information about what lay citizens consider to be relevant, before or during, the design face of the public policy.

Think of public transport as a good example of an implementation that requires informal or practical knowledge from users. The Transantiago in Chile—a public transport policy

established to replace the former system in 2007—is a clear example of a public policy that did not include this kind of information and failed to respond to the needs of those who would be affected by it. Changes had to be made precisely after realising that there was insufficient information regarding the routes that were most common and important for users. Knowing the regularity required for the bus used by most people does not require information about politically relevant facts. This is not to say that those facts are not also a part of the sort of information that might be relevant, only that as I argued in the paper, we should focus on improving the flow of that diversity of information, instead of discarding lay citizens’ experiential knowledge so easily. On the other hand, I also show that we have learnt from standpoint epistemology readings, that people of a specific social standing can have either practical advantages to discover truths, or epistemic privilege in accessing some truths (Méndez 2022, 162). This idea supports the argument regarding the importance of their input.

Gibbons (2022) is sceptical that the epistemic problem of excluding information about lay citizens’ preferred form for policies can outweigh the expected benefits of epistocracy (Gibbons 2022, 3). Nonetheless, he fails to point out which would be the ‘expected benefits’ of epistocracy. If it is indeed an ‘all things considered’ analysis, we would need to discuss in further detail the benefits of a project that at least, as he grants, can be susceptible to an epistemic problem like the one I discuss. A relevant part of the debate regarding epistocracy relies on empirical information regarding citizens’ ignorance. Similarly, Gibbons states that my claim about the little overlap of preferences between lay citizens and an elite electorate ‘is an empirical question’ (Gibbons 2022, 4), but when it comes to comparing epistocracy with other empirical scenarios that have restricted the electorate in the past, for example, there seems to be less willingness to take empirical information into account as a way to evaluate the expected benefits.

Epistocracy Always Excludes

Gibbons (2022) has another objection to the relevance of the Information Gap Problem. Disenfranchisement does not occur in every type of epistocracy, thus, he states that the information I hold gets lost in an epistocratic arrangement, would in fact not be excluded in every case. In this section I would like to discuss that epistocracy as a general model is always meant to be exclusionary.

Although not every form of epistocracy involves direct disenfranchisement of ill-informed citizens, all mechanisms intend to *give more weight* in one way or another to the well-informed electorate. This stronger presence or power granted to the well-informed is always at the detriment of the ill-informed electorate.

Gibbons takes as an example what Thomas Mulligan (2018) calls *Plural Voting*, where in theory there is no electoral exclusion, but an analysis of citizens’ electoral behaviour through time to determine competence. Gibbons believes that given the lack of an electoral exclusion, political leaders would still need to take into account the ill-informed citizens’ preferences—even if less than in the case where there is universal suffrage. However, it is

Mulligan himself who acknowledges that ‘some forms of plural voting may de facto restrict the suffrage’ (Mulligan 2023, n.p). Gibbons touches upon an important issue here with the comment regarding politicians catering to the ill-informed citizens’ preferences.

The reason why disenfranchisement is considered problematic, as Gibbons acknowledges, is connected to the characteristics of our contemporary democracies. One of the few channels available for lay citizens to express their preferences, and usually the only one with legally binding power, is voting. Accountability, and lack of agenda setting capacities for lay citizens are problems that currently affect our democracies even with universal suffrage. Remove or restrict lay citizens’ voting, and these preferences are indeed vulnerable to neglect or invisibility. Nevertheless, my point in the paper is only framed and limited to the epistemic concern behind these worries, namely, that epistocracy with its promise of better epistemic capacities to grant good outcomes, has an epistemic problem in the shape of limited access to *this important* piece of information.

The point I am trying to make here is that epistocracy is always meant to restrict ill-informed citizens’ involvement; this is a definitional characteristic of the approach. Epistocrats do not want to promote inclusion of citizens that are deemed incapable, or at least, less capable than others, to produce better outcomes. The idea that excluding what I call preferences regarding form is not problematic, is a claim that relies on what Gibbons states at the beginning of his reply to my paper, namely, that this information is not very relevant. But holding that epistocracy does not suffer the epistemic problem I identify due to some mechanisms not fostering direct disenfranchisement, is a different claim. The latter, requires an explanation about what is it that disenfranchisement does that is so problematic, and these other forms of exclusion do not do. Answering this question would clarify what it is that protects these other mechanisms against the epistemic problem I describe. For what we have seen here, not voting has to do with preferences not being ‘heard’ or included in some way, and it seems very apparent that mechanisms designed to give more weight to the preferences of the well-informed citizens would in practice do just that. Of course, the kind of exclusion does make a difference, but it does not take away the fact that the preferences of the ill-informed would be *intentionally* restricted from consideration.

The Source of *the* Epistemic Problem: Defining and Assessing Competence

The previous section brings me to one last point raised by Gibbons (2022). According to Gibbons having shown that the severity of the Information Gap Problem is not as grave as I envision, there are other issues about the definition of competence that I only touch upon and seem much more pressing. Some of these are: the difficulties in defining and assessing competence, if it were to include a moral component, and preventing abuses in the implementation of an epistocracy (Gibbons 2022, 4-5).

At the start of my paper, I hold that something especially problematic about epistocrats is that they do not seem to have a clear definition of what they mean by competence. I begin by trying to identify what it can mean to be competent, following their own approaches and readings. In so doing, I reach the conclusion that the most likely definition is that

competence for epistocrats means to possess sufficient information (Méndez 2022, 161). With such definition in the background, I move on to argue that having limited access to a relevant kind of information—lay citizens’ preferred form of implementation of policies—constitutes an epistemic problem for their proposal, even though it is supposed to be epistemically better than our current democratic arrangements.

Gibbons acknowledges that I discuss competence, but does not grant that in fact this analysis plays a very relevant role for the whole paper, since it shows that the source of the Information Gap Problem *is* the epistocratic approach to political competence. What I do is show that the definition that seems most feasible to measure, as well as most attractive to epistocrats, is possessing sufficient information. Then, I argue that even with it the epistemic superiority of epistocracy is questionable.

Likewise, Gibbons claims that I focus on the possession of information, which overlooks other components of the definition such as the moral concern. However, before reaching the aforementioned definition of competence, I evaluate three possible definitions, one of which is an alternative that includes a moral component. I discuss competence as a reliable epistemic disposition, competence as possessing sufficient information, and competence as possessing relevant information plus a concern for specific values—like tolerance, honesty, and solidarity (Méndez 2022, 159-161).

The reason why I discard the moral version is because it puts epistocrats in an inconvenient position. Since it is not controversial to state that possessing relevant information to vote does not imply having a good moral character, we can easily see that the two requirements come apart. The latter means that epistocrats would be forced to develop a compelling argument to claim that they do come together or figure out how to identify the weightier of the two requirements (Méndez 2022, 161). Gibbons appears to draw similar conclusions. He also believes that other forms of competence would be even harder to measure, particularly if they were to include moral concerns, but somehow seems to dismiss my analysis rather quickly.

Regarding the risks of manipulation when assessing competence, Gibbons (2022) considers, in turn, that my approach dismisses the concern too quickly. He holds that ‘safeguarding epistocratic institutions against abuse or manipulation by self-interested actors presents a tremendously difficult problem that epistocrats cannot reasonably ignore’ (Gibbons 2022, 5). The key aspect lies on the ‘self-interested actors’ part. What I suggest is that epistocrats can brush off this worry by identifying actors that could be considered external, or neutral. Of course, this may be a more serious concern than what I grant in my paper, so I do take note of the worry.

Finally, as Gibbons rightly holds, there are a number of open questions for epistocrats before they can offer a viable and attractive alternative to democratic arrangements. My central point in the paper is that this will not happen if epistocrats continue to focus on restricting the electorate in one way or another as a solution to what they deem ‘bad outcomes’. I trust that I was able to respond to Gibbons’s objections by showing that the

Information Gap Problem is indeed an epistemic problem, rooted in the exclusionary character of epistocracy, and the epistocrats' problematic definition of competence.

References

- Ahlstrom-Vij, Kristoffer. 2019. "The Epistemic Benefits of Democracy: A Critical Assessment." In *The Routledge Handbook of Social Epistemology* edited by Miranda Fricker, Peter J. Graham, David Henderson, Nikolaj J.L.L. Pedersen, 406–415. New York: Routledge.
- Brennan, Jason. 2016. *Against Democracy*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Brennan, Jason. 2014. "How Smart Is Democracy? You Can't Answer that Question A Priori." *Critical Review* 26 (1–2): 33–58. doi: 10.1080/08913811.2014.907040.
- Brennan, Jason. 2011. "The Right to a Competent Electorate." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 61 (245): 700–724. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9213.2011.699.x.
- Brennan, Jason. 2009. "Polluting the Polls: When Citizens Should Not Vote." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 87 (4): 535–549. doi: 10.1080/00048400802587309.
- Caplan, Bryan. 2007. *The Myth of the Rational Voter*. Princeton: Princeton University Press
- Estlund, David, 2008, *Democratic Authority*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gibbons, Adam F. 2022. "On Epistocracy's Epistemic Problem: Reply to Méndez." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 11 (8): 1–7.
- Guerrero, Alexander A. 2014. "Against Elections: The Lottocratic Alternative." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 42 (2): 135–178. doi: 10.1111/papa.12029.
- Jeffrey, Anne. 2018. "Limited Epistocracy and Political Inclusion." *Episteme* 15 (4): 412–432. doi: 10.1017/epi.2017.8.
- López-Guerra, Claudio. 2020. "Democrats, Epistocrats, and the Enfranchisement Lottery." *Georgetown Journal of Law & Public Policy* 18 (3/special issue): 773–789.
- López-Guerra, Claudio. 2014. *Democracy and Disenfranchisement: The Morality of Electoral Exclusions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198705789.001.0001.
- López-Guerra, Claudio. 2011. "The Enfranchisement Lottery." *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 10 (2): 211–233. doi: 10.1177/1470594X09372206.
- Méndez, María Pía. 2022. "An Epistemic Problem for Epistocracy." *Social Epistemology* 36 (2): 153–166. doi: 10.1080/02691728.2021.1992531.
- Mulligan, Thomas. 2023. "Meritocracy." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/meritocracy/>.
- Mulligan, Thomas. 2018. "Plural Voting for the Twenty-First Century." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 68 (271): 286–306. doi:10.1093/pq/pqx046.
- Somin, Ilya. 2013. *Democracy and Political Ignorance: Why Smaller Government Is Smarter*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.