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Book Review Against Democracy

Valerie Soon
Duke University

Against Democracy

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Correspondence: valerie.jean.soon@duke.edu



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In this empirically grounded work of political theory, Jason Brennan convincingly argues that we should stop trying to save democracy from our irrational, misinformed, and often willfully ignorant selves. As a replacement, Brennan advocates epistocracy, a form of non-democratic government where political power is distributed according to skill and knowledge. The argument for epistocracy is an instrumentalist one: to the extent that epistocracy works better than democracy, we should adopt epistocracy. Brennan gives us good reasons to believe democracy does not work well for flawed humans, but he fails to show that epistocracy is likely to work better.

Brennan's argument is structured as follows. First, voters need to be well-informed about social, scientific, and historical facts in order to make good decisions. Ideally, voters should be "Vulcans" who think rationally, are charitable to their opponents, and are responsive to evidence (5). ("Vulcans" are a nod to the uber-rational humanoid extraterrestrials in *Star Trek*.) But the typical voter is far from this ideal. She lacks basic knowledge of civic facts, let alone social scientific theories. To assess whether free trade or protectionism is a better policy choice, for example, a voter will need to have some knowledge of basic economics. Not only are voters ignorant, but they are also prone to cognitive biases that distort rational decision-making. Motivated reasoning leads us to reason in ways that confirm our prior beliefs, and confirmation bias leads us to seek out information that confirms our prior beliefs and discount evidence to the contrary. As seminal work in psychology by Tversky & Kahneman (1973) and Asch (1952) have shown, framing effects and social factors like peer pressure to conform and the influence of authority also cause us to make irrational judgments (43-47). Human psychology thus has harmful consequences for democracy, since voters will tend to make ill-informed, irrational judgments. Brennan claims that most voters fit into this category, which can be distinguished into two types. The ignorant and apathetic ones are "hobbits," which characterizes the typical U.S. non-voter. The strong partisans with poor epistemic habits are "hooligans," who cherry-pick information that confirms their worldview and show contempt for the other side. Regular voters, activists, politicians, and party members fall into this camp.

Second, the structure of voting exacerbates voters' epistemic irrationality. Voting essentially presents a collective action problem, in which no individual can make a difference to the outcome. Since each individual's political influence is so low, but the costs of attaining information and overcoming our biases are high, there is no incentive for individuals to become more informed, rational voters. We are intuitively aware of this fact, so we remain irrational (49).

The third major problem with democratic decision-making is that it allows us to harm others due to our incompetence. As such, it is not like other basic rights such as freedom

of speech, religion, or association, whose consequences are restricted to the individuals who make them, at least according to Brennan. Democratic decision-making therefore “requires a higher justificatory burden than decisions we make for ourselves” (9). The case for epistocracy draws most of its strength from this claim, which is something like an antiauthority tenet combined with the harm principle: “When some citizens are morally unreasonable, ignorant, or incompetent about politics, this justifies not permitting them to exercise political authority over others. It justifies either forbidding them from holding power or reducing the power they have in order to protect innocent people from their incompetence” (17).

This sounds all too familiar in light of recent political events and trends. Most voters are ignorant about policy details, even major ones such as the composition of the federal budget. A 2014 Pew Research Center survey¹ found that voters tend to vastly overestimate the amount spent by the federal government on foreign aid and underestimate the amount spent on Social Security. Brennan presents a simple but illustrative analogy to show why we should dump democracy in light of its troubles. Fraternities often sell themselves as striving to “transform ordinary men into extraordinary men” with honor and virtue (71). As it turns out, fraternity men are more likely to commit sexual assault and engage in academic dishonesty than non-fraternity men (72). Fraternities sound nice in theory, but they do a lot of harm in practice. The same goes for deliberative democracy, Brennan claims. Politics *could* be good for us, but in actuality is “more likely to corrupt than ennoble us” (73). As such, we should give up on democracy in favor of a better alternative—epistocracy.

To draw this conclusion, Brennan relies heavily on the assumption that democracy’s value is purely instrumental (Chapter 5). If another system produces more just results, then we ought to adopt that system (11). If epistocracy produces more just results, then we ought to adopt epistocracy. Of course, since we have yet to see an epistocratic system in action, we cannot say for sure whether epistocracy would produce more just results. So, Brennan’s argument is probabilistic, as are the concerns that I will raise with it. Even if we accept all the above claims and agree that democracy does not work, Brennan fails to show that epistocracy is *likely* to produce more just results. Social scientific evidence shows that epistocracy will likely give us no more just a society than democracy, and suggests that an epistocracy might even be less just (if we consider policy outcomes alone in assessments of justice). But to appreciate this point, let us take a look at some possible forms of epistocracy that Brennan sketches out.

¹ Pew Research Center, “From ISIS to Unemployment: What Do Americans Know?,” October 2, 2014. <http://www.people-press.org/2014/10/02/from-isis-to-unemployment-what-do-americans-know/>

In any epistocracy, more informed citizens will have more political power than less informed ones. This basic idea can be implemented in multiple ways. The practical issue on the table is determining who is competent to make decisions. This may be subject to political abuse, but Brennan thinks epistocracy might still perform better than democracy despite such abuses.

One suggestion Brennan makes is restricted suffrage. Under a system of restricted suffrage, political power is restricted to citizens who demonstrate basic knowledge of historical and uncontested social scientific facts on a voter qualification exam (212). Brennan acknowledges that such an exam would look and function similarly to the literacy exams used to exclude blacks from voting in the Jim Crow South. The parallels should make us wary of such an exam—but Brennan claims that an epistocratic voter qualification exam would be administered universally and not in bad faith, unlike the ones administered by racist local governments (223-24). In practice, however, such an exam would likely exclude members of disadvantaged groups from political power because such groups tend to have lower levels of political knowledge. According to this *demographic objection*, “an epistocracy is thus likely to have unfair policies that serve the interests of the advantaged rather than those of the disadvantaged” (227). Brennan expects that “people who pass the exam would be disproportionately white, upper-middle- to upper-class, educated, employed males” (228). The problem is that “there are underlying injustices and social problems that tend to make it so that some groups are more likely to be knowledgeable than others. My view is that rather than insist everyone vote, we should *fix* those underlying injustices” (228). At this point, we might ask: do we have good reason to think that an epistocracy would be good at fixing social injustice, or at least that it would be better than democracy at doing so? Since a major justification for epistocracy is that it will make more just, less harmful policy decisions, an epistocracy should be able to perform better than democracy on this one important measure. But Brennan underestimates the influence of identity and ideology on belief formation, so he is too optimistic in this regard. Since Brennan emphasizes that he is concerned with non-ideal rather than ideal theory, it is fair to ask how an epistocracy would shake out in our world, given its historical inequalities and social divisions.

Recent social scientific evidence on the role of identity in belief formation suggests that a more knowledgeable society will likely not be more just. One major assumption that Brennan makes throughout this book is that higher knowledge straightforwardly correlates with *reduced* cognitive bias and more competence in decision-making. More knowledgeable individuals are supposed to approach the Vulcan ideal, rationally making decisions according to the weight of the evidence. They are not hooligans that treat politics as a sports game, voting according to the party line regardless of the issue. Re-

cent psychological evidence does not bear out this assumption. Kahan et al (2012) show that polarization about climate change is greatest among individuals with the highest degrees of scientific literacy and technical reasoning capacity. Drummond and Fischhoff (2017) find that “individuals with greater education, science education, and science literacy display more polarized beliefs” on issues correlated with political and religious identity. These issues include stem cell research, the Big Bang, human evolution, and climate change (Drummond and Fischhoff 2017, 9587). Sunstein et al (2016) recently found that people demonstrate asymmetrical updating: new information does not cause people to update their beliefs in the same way. When shown evidence suggesting that average temperature rise is lower than previously thought, individuals who antecedently strongly believe climate change is occurring and favor an international agreement to curb climate change fail to change their beliefs. However, they do update their beliefs when shown evidence suggesting that average temperature rise is higher than previously thought. Conversely, individuals who doubt that climate change is occurring and do not support an international agreement show the opposite effects. The takeaway from these studies is that more knowledge does not necessarily lead one to make more competent decisions; in fact, the interaction between our cognitive biases and increased knowledge might create more hooligans. (To be fair, some of these studies came out after *Against Democracy* was published.)

In addition to the psychological evidence detailed above, there is also historical evidence suggesting that the rule of the knowledgeable does not lead to more just policies. For a classic example, we can look to the pre-Jacksonian United States, before universal manhood suffrage was instituted. Before 1792, white male property owners were the only ones granted the right to vote. These men were often much more well-educated than the general population, but failed to make just decisions on both an individual and a collective level. The erudite Thomas Jefferson, for example, was also notoriously a slaveholder. Though this is just one example, it illustrates why Brennan dismisses the demographic objection too quickly. Brennan replies that the demographic objection assumes people vote selfishly, but people vote for what they perceive to be the national common good (227). However, the demographic objection need not assume people vote selfishly. In a diverse society where people have incompatible conceptions of the good, individuals may vote according to what they think is the common good. But of course, what they think is the common good depends on *their* conception of the good, which itself is influenced by identity and interests. Voting according to this conception may harm others. For a contemporary example: people who think it is in the national interest to limit immigration from majority Muslim countries are not necessarily voting selfishly, or intending to harm others. Let us grant that many of them are probably sincere in their belief that this policy is in the national interest. Nevertheless, this policy causes significant harm.

The psychological research and historical anecdotes thus show that more knowledge does not necessarily lead to more competent, rational decision-making. If anything, the “rule of the knowers” (Chapter 8) may end up being the rule of the hooligans—not the Vulcans. An epistocracy may end up worse than democracy at fixing social injustice, especially to the extent that people’s beliefs about these injustices are shaped by ideology and identity. According to 2014 survey data by the Pew Research Center,² the demographic that Brennan concedes would be overrepresented among epistocrats—“disproportionately white, upper-middle- to upper-class, educated, employed males”—leans Republican. The overrepresentation of an already socially dominant group in the epistocracy should make us wary, given the deep partisan divides on issues that affect marginalized groups. On police brutality, for example, 72% of whites and 86% of Republicans have “somewhat warm” or “very warm” views toward police officers, compared with 30% of blacks and 57% of Democrats. These perceptions surely have implications for policy decisions. As such, even if it is true that white men and Republicans tend to be more knowledgeable about policy in general, it does not follow that they will make substantively better and more just decisions. It would be a bad idea to institute epistocracy *before* underlying social injustices have been corrected so that one identity group is not disproportionately represented in the epistocratic class.

Finally, Brennan’s argument for epistocracy relies on principles that lead to conclusions that he, or we, might not be willing to accept. Firstly, his reliance on instrumentalism about institutions leads to a counterintuitive conclusion. According to Brennan, “political institutions are more like hammers than persons or poems” (139). They are tools that should not have intrinsic or expressive value. If we should give more political power to individuals who are more knowledgeable, why restrict political power to citizens or even residents of a country? Many non-citizens are more knowledgeable than citizens about U.S. political issues. If the value of self-determination and symbolism should be irrelevant to political decision-making, as Brennan claims in Chapter 5, then perhaps non-citizens should be able to hold political power. Moreover, non-citizens are probably less prone to the biasing effects of party affiliation, ideology, and identity, so to that extent they may even be more well-suited to be epistocrats. This implication may trouble most democratic theorists, but may be consistent with Brennan’s other views on immigration and open borders.

Brennan’s use of the harm principle also seems to lead him to a conclusion he may be unwilling to live with, in this case. In Chapter 6, he claims that because political liber-

² Pew Research Center, “A Deep Dive into Party Affiliation”. April 7, 2015. <http://www.people-press.org/2015/04/07/a-deep-dive-into-party-affiliation>

ties have the power to harm others, it is not like the civil liberties—freedom of speech, religion, or association—whose consequences are restricted to the individuals who make them (9-10). Brennan argues, “When elections are decided on the basis of unreliable epistemic procedures or unreasonable moral attitudes, this exposes the governed to an undue risk of serious harm” (159). This seems right, but the harm principle here does not cleave a satisfactory distinction between political decision-making and the other basic liberties. The consequences of the exercise of civil liberties are not restricted to the individuals who make them. The economist Tyler Cowen (2015) argues that our associational preferences for those similar to us, particularly among the upper-middle and upper classes, has negative ramifications for society. Well-educated, wealthier individuals tend to cluster together in metropolitan areas. Since privileged individuals have more market power, their residential clustering preferences cause poorer, less-well-educated individuals (usually people of color) to be pushed into cheaper, segregated neighborhoods. The effect of associational preferences on the market has troubling consequences for social mobility, since “more integrated neighborhoods produce greater upward mobility in terms of income and education” (Cowen 2015, 66). Richard Reeves (2017) has also made a similar argument about associational preferences. Reeves claims that the upper-middle class engages in unfair “opportunity hoarding.” They take pains to ensure that their children will have a competitive advantage over others by supporting exclusionary zoning policies, sending them to private schools, or self-segregating in districts with good public schools. It is hard to say how this parental exercise of free association can be curbed by the state, but these practices harm the less privileged by contributing to an unequal playing field.

Whatever the solution, it seems clear that the consequences of exercising the civil liberties are not limited to the individuals who exercise them. The exercise of the civil liberties can harm others by limiting their opportunities, causing them to be worse off than they otherwise would be. If this is right, then Brennan may have to concede that civil liberties be restricted as well, based on the harm principle. Political liberties are not the only liberties that unjustly harm others.

Overall, Brennan’s *Against Democracy* is an elegantly argued, empirically substantiated work of non-ideal political theory. Political philosophers interested in the relationship between ideal and non-ideal theory will profit from this book, and Brennan’s succinct, concrete style makes this book accessible to non-academic readers. *Against Democracy* will provide egalitarian-minded readers, in particular, with something to chew on, as Brennan raises provoking questions about the tension between political liberty and the right against harm. However, even if we accept Brennan’s claims about the ways in which democracy fails, we need not accept his conclusion that epistocracy is a more promising

alternative. He lays out too ideal a conception of epistocratic decision-making, relying on the assumption that more knowledge makes us better decisionmakers. The social scientific evidence suggests that this assumption is false. Given the way the most knowledgeable among us are—just as irrational and biased as the rest of us, if not more so—epistocracy is likely to perpetuate injustice, instead of being more just than To truly be a work in non-ideal theory, Brennan should take this into account.

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