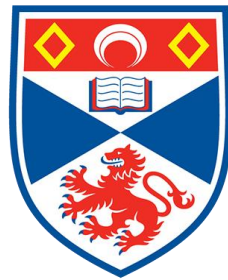# Rejuvenating Democracy

Age, Knowledge, and the Right to Vote

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

at the University of St Andrews

November 2020

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Abstract

At the core of democracy is a simple idea: *one person, one vote*. However, all democracies disenfranchise citizens below a certain age. What justifies this practice? The answer seems obvious: voting isn't a children's game. When citizens head to the ballots, a lot is at stake: who runs the government and what policies are implemented significantly affects the lives of many citizens. According to a widely held view, voting requires a certain competence that children lack. If we take this idea a little further, we may conclude that adult citizens ought to demonstrate a certain level of competence before receiving the right to vote, too. However, most contemporary political philosophers reject this "epistocratic" line of thought. Either for epistemic, moral, or pragmatic reasons, they endorse enfranchising every adult. This raises the central question of this dissertation: can we justify giving the right to vote to *all* and *only* citizens above a certain age? I argue that we cannot. To establish this claim, I assess three different voting schemes: *Standard Democracy*, which gives exactly one vote to all and only citizens above a certain age; *Epistocratic Democracy*, which gives more voting power to "politically knowledgeable" citizens; and *Ageless Democracy*, which gives all citizens, regardless of age, the right to cast exactly one vote in democratic procedures. First, I defend Standard Democracy against Epistocratic Democracy. This amounts to an argument that *all* citizens above a certain age should have equal voting rights. I then evaluate potential justifications for conceding these rights *only* to citizens above a certain age, and reject them. This amounts to a case for Ageless Democracy. Abandoning the voting age is both a theoretically consistent implication of rejecting Epistocratic Democracy and a practically desirable approach to reinvigorating democratic procedures.

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Acknowledgements

I expect these acknowledgements to be the most-read part of this dissertation, so I feel a mild pressure to say something meaningful now. Unfortunately, all I have to say is rather obvious: this work has benefited greatly from the generous help of other people. The person who helped the most is without any doubt my first supervisor, Adam Etinson: a careful reader, thorough critic, and, above all, considerate interlocutor who always has a sympathetic ear and good advice. My second supervisor, Jessica Brown, provided precise feedback and useful suggestions whenever I approached her. Sonia Roca Royes, Rowan Cruft, Alex Douglas, and Kent Hurtig, who served as my annual reviewers, gave many fruitful comments and helped me to stay on track during the whole process.

Hélène Landemore gave me the opportunity to spend one semester of my PhD at Yale University, which was an extremely rewarding experience. In particular, I would like to thank the members of the Political Theory Reading Group for the intense and instructive Monday afternoon discussions.

In the final stages of this project, I profited immensely from a superb team of proofreaders, consisting of Katharina Bernhard, Lorenzo Lazzarini, Madg Lhroob, Colin McLean, Saranga Sudarshan, and Deryn Thomas. Joe Bowen, Lucas Sierra Vélez, Andreas Sorger, Rasmus Uhrenfeldt, and the members of the Political Theory Reading Group at the University of Edinburgh also gave valuable feedback on earlier drafts of these chapters.

Special thanks go to the herring gulls of St Andrews, who I have very much enjoyed watching on my walks through the town and along the beach.

In financial matters, I am grateful to the Society for Applied Philosophy for several conference travel bursaries; to the St Leonard's Postgraduate College for

"The history of democracy is one of increasing enfranchisement, as women, non-whites, propertyless, and other second-class citizens became at long last trusted in their capacity to vote and participate responsibly in political life. If anything, history suggests that existing regimes, including democracies, have yet to explore the full potential of democratic reason."

Hélène Landemore

"Lassen Sie das Kind doch mal nach vorne!"

Woman in Loriot's "Kalbshaxe Florida"

Three Pictures of Democracy

What does democracy look like? If you type the term into the search field of your preferred image search engine, you won't find much that pleases your eye. Generic hands putting a ballot into a box and coarse-grained arms, raised against empty backgrounds, are the most frequent things you will see. To the extent that these images are informative at all, what they show (other than that it is quite hard, apparently, to graphically illustrate the idea of democracy in an appealing way) is that even the most stripped-down version of democracy has at least two indispensable features. First, elections. The act of voting somehow seems paradigmatic of what people do in a democracy, and the right to vote appears to be, in a sense, the flagship political right citizens of democratic countries enjoy. The second feature is citizen equality. One curious fact about the images you find online is that they rarely ever show in any further detail who all these ballot-inserting or raised hands belong to. The variety of colours invokes diversity, but they do not reveal anything specific about the race, gender, wealth, or other characteristics of the people participating in these exemplary democratic activities. There are people from all walks of life, the images suggest; but in the eyes of democracy, they are all the same.

Democracy is often associated with a famous slogan that merges these two ideas about elections and equality: *one person, one vote*. This simple phrase both indicates that the vote is the single most important asset citizens possess in a democracy, and it captures the thought that it does not matter who they are and what is distinctive about them. Collective decisions are to be made according to a procedure that treats everyone the same way. Everyone's judgement has equal weight, and if people's

judgements diverge, as we can expect in diverse societies, the majority determines what ought to be done.

The real picture, of course, does not look so neat. No democracy has ever implemented the principle of *one person, one vote* in this unqualified form. All democratic countries deviate from this supposed ideal in some way or other. The issue here is not with the well-known distinction between direct and representative forms of democracy and the differences in executive political power that are an essential characteristic of the latter. Rather, all democratic countries deviate from *one person, one vote* in the more fundamental sense that they do not afford all citizens the right to participate in voting procedures, whether they be referendums on specific policies or elections of political representatives.

The most-widely adopted and most broadly accepted restriction on the right to vote, implemented by all democracies of both past and present days, is the exclusion of children from the electorate. All democratic countries define a voting age below which citizens are flatly denied the vote. The voting age differs here and there,[1] but these differences are insignificant compared to the overwhelming consensus that citizens below a certain age should not be permitted to participate in elections or referendums.

What explains this remarkably strong consensus? The short answer, allegedly, is that voting isn't a children's game. When citizens head to the ballots, a lot is at stake: who represents the people in the legislature, who runs the government, and what policies are implemented can significantly impact the lives of all citizens. Why would we allow these fateful decisions to partly be made by people who are, as a matter of developmental necessity, inexperienced, naïve, and immature? According to a widely held view, exercising the vote is serious business and requires a competence that young people lack. Thus, while the question of *what* the voting age should be is, every once in a while, subject to controversy, there has never been, at least to my knowledge, a serious public debate in any democratic country on whether the voting age itself should be abandoned.[2]

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[1] Almost 90 percent of all countries set this age at 18, but it is lower in some (e.g. Austria, Cuba, Ethiopia, Greece) and higher in very few countries (e.g. Lebanon, Kuwait, Oman, South Korea). To date, no country enfranchises citizens below the age of 16. The highest legal voting age is 25 years (in the United Arab Emirates). Cf. "Legal Voting Age By Country" (https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/legal-voting-age-by-country.html [retrieved 6 May 2020]).

[2] In May 2020, Hermann Otto Solms, member of the German parliament and former vice president of the Bundestag, initiated a cross-party proposal to lower the voting age to 0. At the time of writing this dissertation, however, it was unclear whether this proposal would actually be placed on the

The disenfranchisement of children is such a deeply entrenched feature of democracy that it barely even occurs to us that it might be in tension with democratic principles we are otherwise committed to.[3] But now consider a case where the tension is more salient. Assume a democratic society takes the rationale that arguably justifies the electoral exclusion of children, namely that voting is serious business and requires voters to have a certain level of competence, one step further: it now requires citizens to pass a test of political knowledge before they get the right to vote; or it gives *more* votes to citizens who perform satisfactorily at such a test. Such a voting scheme would entirely abandon the idea that all citizens should have an equal say in collective decisions. Instead, it is based on the thought that the judgements of those with a superior understanding of the issues at stake should be privileged in some way. Employing a term that is now common in the literature, we can call such a voting scheme *epistocratic*.[4]

In democratic theory, the idea to introduce epistocratic deviations from *one person, one vote* has received a lot of attention in the last couple of years. It seems natural to relate the sudden rise of interest in epistocracy to current political circumstances. Over the last decade, democracies across the world have produced some rather perplexing electoral outcomes. Some people have argued that at least part of the

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parliamentary agenda (similar initiatives had failed in 2005 and 2009). Cf. "Kinder an die Macht" (https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/abgeordnete-wollen-wahlalter-auf-null-jahre-senken-kinder-an-die-macht-kolumne-a-00000000-0002-0001-0000-000171168297 [retrieved 27 July 2020]).

[3] Something similar might be said about the disenfranchisement of mentally handicapped citizens. However, this deviation from *one person, one vote* is less widely implemented and – perhaps because of that – also less widely accepted: roughly two thirds of all countries in the European Union do not afford voting rights to citizens with a severe mental handicap (cf. "The right to political participation for persons with disabilities: human rights indicators," https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra-2014-right-political-participation-persons-disabilities_en.pdf [retrieved 6 May 2020]). In their case, however, the rationale according to which voting rights should be conditional upon a certain level of mental capacity is much more frequently challenged than in the case of children. A recent example for this is Germany, where the disenfranchisement of mentally handicapped citizens was abandoned in 2019, after several years of public discourse. A recurring argument in this debate was that the electoral exclusion of mentally handicapped citizens is in tension with democratic values. The democratic commitment to the equality of all citizens, many commentators noted, requires us to acknowledge that everyone has the right to have a say irrespective of their condition. See for example "Demokratie ist keine Phrase" (https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/wahlrecht-fuer-behinderte-demokratie-ist-keine-phrase-16143792.html [retrieved 29 April 2020]).

[4] I say more about the term, the proponents of, the arguments for and the objections to epistocracy in the next chapters.

explanation for these unfortunate electoral choices (think of your favourite examples from the 2010s) is that many citizens in democratic societies are severely uninformed or misinformed about politics, and that pervasive political ignorance leads to the election of less apt political leaders and less desirable policies than these societies could avail themselves to if they privileged the judgements of politically knowledgeable citizens in some way. Although the case for epistocracy is often presented as independent from the contingencies of contemporary politics, the widely perceived present crisis of liberal democracy certainly accounts for much of the attention epistocratic proposals get at the moment: they are being received as proposed solutions for an alleged deficit afflicting democracy, the harmful consequences of which have, arguably, frequently become manifest in recent years.

In saying that epistocratic proposals currently receive a lot of attention, I do not mean to imply that they are frequently endorsed; in fact, the opposite is the case. Among political theorists, proponents of an epistocratic approach to voting rights constitute a small minority. The vast majority rejects it, both as a general idea and as a specific solution to current pathologies of liberal democracy. Moreover, judging by the fact that no country has ever adopted an epistocratic voting scheme, it looks like the public at large does not endorse it either. In general, one might even say that epistocratic deviations from *one person, one vote* are as commonly rejected as the disenfranchisement of children is accepted: while not affording voting rights to citizens below a certain age is widely endorsed and routinely implemented, the proposal to give different amounts of voting power to sane adult citizens based on their political knowledge elicits strong reservations and is practically untested. This difference is striking, given that both deviations are based, presumably, on the same basic idea that voting requires some competence that not all citizens possess.

In this work, I argue that we should indeed reject the epistocratic proposal in any form – as I have indicated, this is very much a mainstream position that many others have defended too. However, few authors have realised that this view is at least in tension with another mainstream position, namely that some citizens should not have the right to vote at all, and that age is an appropriate criterion to distinguish between those who may and those who may not vote. I argue that, given our anti-epistocratic commitment to the equal and universal enfranchisement of adult citizens, there is no justification for disenfranchising some citizens by means of a voting age.

This is a claim in democratic theory, and as such, it could be seen as merely of theoretical interest: practically, it might be said, it is obvious that the voting age is indispensable. Not only *should* very young children not vote, but they also plainly

cannot vote. I do not deny this. I will argue, however, that there is a feasible voting scheme that allows citizens to attain the right to vote regardless of their age. Adopting such a voting scheme, I suggest, is not merely more consistent with other normative commitments that most political philosophers endorse at the level of democratic theory; it is also more desirable from the perspective of democratic practice. There is reason to think that democracies could deliver more just and more sustainable political outcomes if they did not employ a voting age. In brief, my main line of argument is this: redesigning democracy such that it does not flatly exclude young people from voting is both a consistent application of what successful arguments against epistocracy imply, and is a better response to the crisis of liberal democracy than adopting epistocratic proposals or maintaining the status quo.

Accordingly, the arguments I intend to make hinge on a comparative analysis of the respective strengths and weaknesses of different voting schemes. For this purpose, it will be useful to distinguish between three schemes that will be central points of reference for my assessment:

(1) *Standard Democracy*. All citizens at or above the voting age have exactly one vote and all citizens below the voting age do not have a vote.

(2) *Epistocratic Democracy*. All citizens at or above the voting age have at least one vote. Citizens who meet a certain threshold of political knowledge additionally receive one extra vote. All citizens below the voting age do not have a vote.

(3) *Ageless Democracy*. All citizens at or above a certain age have exactly one vote. All citizens below that age have exactly one vote if they complete a voluntary registration process, which does not involve an assessment of their political knowledge.

I call the first voting scheme "Standard" because all democratic countries adopt it in some form (other differences between their electoral systems notwithstanding).[5]

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[5] Here, a qualification is in order: many democratic countries disenfranchise at least some parts of the adult population. I already mentioned the mentally handicapped, but many countries also exclude felons, expatriates, or foreign residents from voting. Throughout this work, I will put the latter three groups aside. The cases I will be interested in are those in which citizens or groups of citizens are disenfranchised because they are regarded as insufficiently *competent* to vote. This applies to young and mentally handicapped people. I will focus on the former, but some of my objections to the disenfranchisement of the young (especially those in chapter 6, not so much those in chapter 7)

Note, however, that Standard Democracy does not specify what the voting age is. On my account, *any* voting scheme that flatly disenfranchises all citizens below a certain age counts as a form of Standard Democracy, regardless of what that age is. If a democracy sets the voting age at 5 years, it will, somewhat counterintuitively, count as "Standard" in this sense.

The second voting scheme is one among several possible forms of democracy that qualify as "epistocratic." Later (in chapter 2), I will give a detailed account of why I take Epistocratic Democracy (capitalised) to be the most compelling one, and thus the strongest alternative to Standard Democracy epistocrats can offer. As you can see, I assume that Epistocratic Democracy both introduces differences in voting power between adult citizens *and* excludes citizens below a certain age. It is democracy as we know it, except for the fact that some adults receive an extra vote. The assumption that Epistocratic Democracy is essentially Standard Democracy *plus* extra votes for knowledgeable citizens allows me to first limit the discussion to an assessment of Standard Democracy and Epistocratic Democracy. If (as I will argue) the former ought to be preferred over the latter, I can then proceed to comparing Standard Democracy and Ageless Democracy. If (as I will argue) the latter ought to be preferred over the former, it follows that Ageless Democracy also ought to be preferred over Epistocratic Democracy. However, we could easily construct an "ageless" version of Epistocratic Democracy that allocates one vote to all citizens, regardless of age, and one extra vote if they meet a certain threshold of political knowledge (again, regardless of age). This makes the assessment of these voting schemes more complex. In particular, as I argue in chapter 4, it is at least not obvious whether we should still prefer Standard Democracy when compared to the "ageless" version of Epistocratic Democracy. For my main line of argument, however, this distinction between the "ageless" and the "standard" version of Epistocratic Democracy is irrelevant; the objections to Epistocratic Democracy that I raise in chapter 5 apply to both versions, so it ought to be rejected in any case. Still, the possibility of Ageless Epistocratic Democracy raises some interesting questions about the relation between age, knowledge, and the right to vote, to which I will return several times.

The third voting scheme is the one that I seek to endorse. Ageless Democracy departs from Standard Democracy insofar as it does not make having a certain age a necessary condition for being allowed to vote. On this scheme, citizens of any age can

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also apply to the mentally handicapped. Felons, expatriates, and foreign residents tend to be excluded because they have arguably forfeited their right to vote or do not belong to the community. I do not take a stance on whether disenfranchising them can be justified along these lines.

attain the vote simply if they register for it, and if they don't do so, they will later automatically be enfranchised when they have reached a certain age. Ageless Democracy also departs from Epistocratic Democracy because it does not grant more than one vote to any citizen. Moreover, the registration process does not involve a substantial assessment of an applicant's political knowledge. I develop and defend the details of this voting scheme in chapters 6 and 7.

As already indicated, there is at present a lively but rather one-sided debate about epistocracy: a few authors have argued that we should, and many have argued that we should *not* adopt an epistocratic voting scheme. Although no contribution I am aware of is explicit on this point, it seems plausible to interpret the latter as defences of Standard Democracy, which, as mentioned earlier, all democratic countries employ in some form. I argue that the negative case against Epistocratic Democracy has ramifications that have largely been overlooked: successful refutations of epistocratic proposals do not vindicate Standard Democracy. Instead, they commit us to accept Ageless Democracy. It is this positive upshot of anti-epistocratic arguments, I suggest, which makes them most interesting for political theory. The case against epistocratic proposals is not a defence of the status quo. Rather, it implies a departure from Standard Democracy that is no less significant than the one that epistocrats advocate for. The crucial point is that this departure leads us in the opposite direction: instead of introducing additional conditions for holding voting power in a democracy, we should reduce these conditions.

Here is a brief overview of how my argument will proceed. Chapter 1 is preliminary work. I situate my discussion in the broader context of contemporary democratic theory and discuss the "epistemic turn" that democratic theory has taken in recent years, which has revived the debate about the specific value of democracy. As I will show, this "turn" has prompted the question whether a concern with the epistemic quality of democratic procedures requires making these procedures less egalitarian. Most democratic theorists deny this. However, they also regard the disenfranchisement of citizens below a certain age as unproblematic. To the extent that the latter view follows a broadly epistocratic rationale, these two widely held commitments – *for* enfranchising all adults, *against* enfranchising children – do not square well. The first chapter simply raises the question whether there is a justification for Standard Democracy that resolves this tension. A full answer to this question must have two parts: an anti-epistocratic part that justifies the equal enfranchisement of all adults; and a pro-voting-age part that justifies the disenfranchisement of all children.

Ultimately, I argue that Standard Democrats have to give up either their opposition to epistocracy or to enfranchising children, and that it is the latter option they should take. For this argument to succeed, I first need to show that Standard Democrats indeed ought to reject the epistocratic option. And to show this, I first have to present the epistocratic option in its most compelling form. In chapter 2, I sketch what I take to be the strongest version of an epistocratic voting scheme. In particular, I argue that democratic theorists who reject epistocracy have often relied on a false dichotomy between democracy and epistocracy, which has led them to consider impoverished versions of the latter. My account of Epistocratic Democracy, I suggest, survives several core objections to epistocracy that have been raised in the literature.

In chapter 3, I go down the epistocratic route even further and explore which potential benefits Epistocratic Democracy might yield compared to Standard Democracy. I argue that even the least demanding conception of democracy requires citizens to be attentive to and acquire a modicum of knowledge about politics. Problematically, empirical work suggests that many citizens fail to meet this demand. Epistocratic Democracy, I suggest, might be better equipped to provide the conditions for an attentive and informed citizenry because it publicly expresses the value of considered judgements and encourages citizens to acquire political knowledge. To the extent that the evaluation of voting schemes hinges on their propensity to enhance this specific kind of civic virtue, this constitutes a pro tanto reason to prefer Epistocratic Democracy over Standard Democracy.

I then proceed to argue why, nevertheless, Epistocratic Democracy must be rejected. My case against Epistocratic Democracy has two parts, the first of which is developed in chapter 4. Drawing on a liberal understanding of political legitimacy, I argue that the formal inequalities that Epistocratic Democracy introduces vis-à-vis Standard Democracy would have to enhance the epistemic reliability of democratic procedures beyond reasonable doubt to be justifiable. Epistocratic Democracy does not meet this condition, which renders the additional formal inequality it introduces indefensible. This constitutes a moral argument against Epistocratic Democracy. However, I also point out that this argument hinges on several simplifying assumptions (here, the distinction between "standard" and "ageless" Epistocratic Democracy will become relevant). Once we relax these assumptions, the argument might still work against Epistocratic Democracy, but it is less clear whether and to what extent it vindicates Standard Democracy.

In chapter 5, I develop the second part of my case against Epistocratic Democracy. Drawing on the recent literature on democratic deconsolidation and the rise of populism, I argue that implementing Epistocratic Democracy is bound to do more harm

than good. More specifically, it will further undermine citizens' trust in democratic procedures to deliver outcomes that serve the interests of the majority. Proponents of epistocracy have occasionally suggested that the case for their approach is particularly *strong* in an age of populism, but I argue that this claim rests on a severe misjudgement of the specific threat that populism poses to liberal democracy. They therefore end up suggesting a reform strategy that is more likely to exacerbate rather than mitigate this threat. This constitutes a pragmatic argument against Epistocratic Democracy. In sum, the moral and the pragmatic argument give us a conclusive reason to reject this view.

If this is correct, Standard Democrats have completed the first part of the challenge I raise for them in the first chapter: they have ruled out the epistocratic option. For Standard Democracy to prevail, however, they also need to justify the disenfranchisement of children. In chapter 6, I consider possible arguments Standard Democrats can make to this effect. I argue that the most promising candidate to yield the two-pronged justification Standard Democracy requires – against epistocracy on the one hand, for the voting age on the other – is an epistemic conception of democracy according to which democratic procedures are justified, at least in part, because they yield "correct" outcomes with a certain reliability. If it can be shown that the enfranchisement of children would somehow undermine democracy's epistemic capacity, then presumably their exclusion could be justified. But as I try to show, any attempt to spell out this argument fails. I conclude that the voting age lacks a solid theoretical justification.

Standard Democrats could be inclined to discard this point as a merely philosophical quibble: even if, in theory, there is no watertight justification for disenfranchising citizens below a certain age, we all know that, in practice, democracy will work a lot better when they are excluded. A democracy without a voting age seems neither feasible nor desirable. In chapter 7, I turn against this objection. I first sketch a voting scheme that allows all citizens, regardless of age, to become eligible for voting. I then proceed to argue that this scheme, which I call *Ageless Democracy*, is not just theoretically more consistent but also instrumentally more desirable than Standard Democracy. There are two reasons for this: first, given the demographic structure of many Western democratic countries, democracies without a voting age will be in a better position to enhance intergenerational justice. Second, there is reason to believe that in the long run, enfranchising citizens early on in life can have a positive impact on overall levels of political engagement. Giving young people a say in politics can strengthen their allegiances to democratic norms and procedures and make them less

susceptible to the now widespread trope that political decisions are withdrawn from and often opposed to the genuine will of "the people."

What emerges, then, is an argument for a rather far-reaching electoral reform. Luckily, one could say laconically, the time seems ripe for far-reaching reforms anyway. There is a strong sense that liberal democracy is currently going through an existential crisis. Across the West, citizens have become disenchanted with democratic institutions and increasingly distrust their ability to truly reflect the interests of the majority. Over the past few years, democratic theorists have made numerous institutional proposals to revive democracy. Many of the innovations that have been suggested aim at enhancing the quality of citizens' political participation in some way: how can we make sure that citizens become better informed, more open-minded, more objective and less biased when making the electoral decisions we all have to cope with? The epistocratic proposal to make citizens' voting power dependent upon their level of political knowledge wants to address precisely this question. Although we should reject it, the challenge to find better answers to this question remains. The task, in other words, is to achieve the epistocrat's goals in a way that renders obsolete epistocratic means. Democracy is a demanding form of government. We do need to be concerned about which conditions must obtain for sufficiently many people to acquire the skills and knowledge they need for "the rule of the people" to work. In what follows, I argue that one (although probably small) part of the solution to improve the epistemic circumstances of democracy is to open it up to the young. Instilling in young people both a sense that their opinion counts and that they ought to take seriously the responsibility they bear when making their opinion count at the ballots will not be enough to turn them into the virtuous citizens that idealised accounts of democracy often envision. But it increases the chance that they will endorse and promote democratic solutions to the manifold political problems ahead of them.

Epistemic Democracy and Suffrage Restrictions

1. Introduction

This work belongs to the field of political epistemology, and more specifically to the epistemic branch of democratic theory that has evolved in recent years. I explore how the basic idea of this approach – broadly, that part of what's good about democratic procedures is that they are epistemically valuable – bears on the question of who should have the right to vote. A main focus will be on the relation between epistemic theories of democracy and the political status of children, but I will also address the more general issue of how the ethics of enfranchisement as a whole is affected by the ideas that epistemic democrats advance.

This chapter serves a preparatory function. In section 2, I explain what is distinctive about epistemic theories of democracy and how they emerged from the broader paradigm of deliberative democracy. I clarify some terminological issues and provide a brief survey of the main strands in epistemic democracy: a veritistic, a conciliationist, and a pragmatist one. Although my argument ultimately does not hinge on it, I try to show that the veritistic version of epistemic democracy has some plausibility. In section 3, I lay out how veritistic epistemic democracy gives rise to an "epistocratic challenge," which holds that voting power should be allocated according to political competence. This, of course, does not sound particularly democratic, and so democratic theorists of all persuasions, epistemic or otherwise, have argued against this

implication. Most of them, however, do not want to overstep the mark when defending an egalitarian and inclusive approach to enfranchisement. They want to maintain that citizens below a certain age should be excluded from the franchise. In section 4, I argue that proponents of this common set of views – against epistocracy on the one side, for a voting age on the other – are in a predicament. They bear the burden of justifying the voting age, and they have to discharge this burden in a way that does not simultaneously undermine their opposition against epistocracy. This will set the stage for the chapters that follow, which will argue that democratic theorists cannot both reject epistocracy and endorse the voting age, and that it is their commitment to the latter that they should reconsider.

2. The Epistemic Turn in Democratic Theory

2.1 Background

Why and under what conditions is democracy a legitimate form of government?[1] In post-Rawlsian political philosophy, the most influential paradigm in which this question has been addressed is that of deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy comprises a variety of heterogenous approaches, but a central idea that unites them is that purely aggregative accounts of democracy, which perceive of the political preferences of citizens as given and regard democratic procedures simply as a device to tally up these individual preferences, draw an impoverished picture of democracy and cannot account for the normative significance of democratically made decisions (cf. Talisse 2012, 206ff.). Deliberative democrats trace the source of legitimacy to a dimension of the democratic process that is prior to the vote count: a fair exchange of reasons among free and equal citizens in a process of public deliberation. Historically, deliberative democrats were first primarily concerned with specifying, in the ideal, which features these processes of public deliberation ought to possess in order to bestow legitimacy on democratically made decisions. Jürgen Habermas, the most influential proponent of deliberative democracy, famously developed an account of an "ideal speech situation" in which, very roughly, everyone has an equal say, nobody who is competent to make a contribution has been excluded, and

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[1] I follow Simmons (1999, 746) in understanding a political arrangement as *legitimate* if the government has the "complex moral right (...) to be the exclusive imposer of binding duties on its subjects, to have its subjects comply with these duties, and to use coercion to enforce the duties," and as *justified* if it is "prudentially rational, morally acceptable, or both" (1999, 740).

participants are free from both internal and external coercion (cf. Habermas 1984). A more recent trend in deliberative democracy is to empirically investigate the concrete circumstances in which deliberation works or fails, and how different deliberative institutions impact each other within a democratic framework (cf. Mansbridge et al. 2012).

Contemporary epistemic democracy is, in many ways, a child (and sometimes an unruly one) of deliberative democracy. Epistemic democrats agree with deliberative democrats that we cannot comprehend democratic legitimacy if we merely understand democracy as a procedure to aggregate individual preferences; we also need an account of deliberation. They go beyond deliberative democracy, however, insofar as they insist that the value of deliberation is not exhausted by its procedural fairness. Instead, deliberation has an epistemic dimension too: it brings to the fore relevant considerations, gathers information, stimulates the exchange of reasons and thereby enhances citizens' capacity to make considered choices when deliberation is over and it is time to vote. Likewise, as Joshua Cohen (1986) has argued in a seminal article, voting is a cognitive activity, not just a collective expression of preferences. By casting their vote in a certain way, citizens express a judgement rather than a preference. They try to provide the best possible answer to a given political question. In this vein, epistemic democrats aim to show that both stages of the democratic process, deliberation and voting, have a distinctively epistemic dimension that traditional deliberative democratic theory has neglected. As Gerald Gaus notes, "it is hard to overestimate how important the success of this project would be for democratic theory. No longer would democracy be an uneasy mix of fairness and stupidity" (2011, 271). Epistemic democrats attempt to establish that democracy is, in some sense, a smart arrangement to make political decisions.

Beyond this common focus, epistemic democrats differ significantly both with respect to their understanding of the epistemic value democracy allegedly realises and regarding the question of how weighty epistemic considerations are compared to other (especially moral) considerations in favour of democracy. Before I move on to provide a brief overview of the current landscape in epistemic democratic theory, we should make a couple of terminological distinctions that will help to disambiguate the different kinds of projects epistemic democrats pursue.

2.2 Terminology

Epistemic democrats are intermittently characterised as employing an epistemic approach to, making an epistemic argument for, or providing an epistemic justification, defence, conception, theory, account, model, or critique of democracy. These

terms are obviously not equivalent, but the distinctions often get blurred in the literature.[2] I suggest using the most general term, an epistemic *approach* to democracy, to denote what all epistemic democrats share, namely a concern about whether and to what extent democratic procedures have epistemic value. But this can mean several things. Someone who provides an epistemic *conception*, *theory*, *account*, or *model* (I take these terms to be interchangeable in this context) of democracy thinks that the legitimacy of democratic procedures hinges, at least in part, on their epistemic qualities. They do not necessarily claim that democracy can be argued for or even justified in epistemic terms. Indeed, the very point of offering or adopting an epistemic conception might be to subsequently advance an epistemic *critique* of democracy.

In contrast, someone who makes an epistemic *argument* for democracy thinks that democratic procedures possess some epistemic quality that constitutes a (not necessarily conclusive) reason for accepting these procedures as legitimate. For instance, the probably most famous epistemic argument for democracy is based on *Condorcet's Jury Theorem*. This theorem holds that a large number of voters, when presented with a binary choice, will almost certainly choose the correct option if (a) each voter is at least slightly better than chance at choosing correctly, (b) they vote sincerely, and (c) vote choices are independent from one another.[3] Someone who advances an epistemic argument for democracy need not hold that democratic procedures can be justified exclusively in epistemic terms. In fact, they need not hold that democratic procedures can be justified at all.

Finally, someone who aims to provide an epistemic *justification* or *defence* (again, I take these terms to be equivalent in this context) of democracy thinks that there is conclusive reason to accept democratic procedures as legitimate and that epistemic arguments play an indispensable role in establishing this. They do not necessarily

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[2] Lever and Chin (2017) at least distinguish between epistemic conceptions and justifications of democracy.

[3] It is unclear whether the conditions of the theorem ever obtain, or how we could ever find out whether they do. For this reason, most democratic theorists, including some epistemic democrats, are sceptical whether it yields an epistemic argument for democracy (e.g. Anderson 2006, 10ff.; Estlund 2008, chapter 12; Saunders 2010a, 166f.; Waldron 2012, 198; Landemore 2013,147-56; Christiano 2018, section 5.1). Goodin and Estlund (2004, 133f.) suggest that the actual value of the theorem is to "use the outcome of the election to help us reflect on judgements about average voter competence, and hence on the decision of whether to place positive or negative faith in the outcome of the democratic election." Goodin and Spiekermann (2018) try to show how the theorem can be extended beyond its classical framework, and that a revised version of it can be employed in an epistemic argument for democracy, after all.

claim that there are no further, non-epistemic arguments for democracy that are also indispensable in accounting for its legitimacy. Neither do they always claim that democratic procedures as they actually exist in different democratic countries can be justified, partially or even exclusively, epistemically.[4] Instead, their epistemic justification of democracy might be based on certain idealised assumptions, for example regarding voter rationality or public discourse. In fact, an epistemic justification of a democratic ideal might imply that real-world democracies fail to meet the conditions of legitimacy.

With these distinctions at hand, let us consider, in broad outline, the views of some main contributors to the field of epistemic democracy.

2.3 Veritistic epistemic democracy

The most influential contemporary epistemic justification of democracy is due to David Estlund (1997, 2008). He argues that procedural fairness alone is insufficient to account for democratic legitimacy. If fairness were all that mattered, we could not explain why we should make political decisions democratically rather than by flipping a coin or through some other randomised procedure. Therefore, in addition to being fair, democratic procedures must also possess a certain epistemic quality. On Estlund's account, they must at least be "better than random" at yielding outcomes that are correct according to some procedure-independent standard. With a certain reliability, democratic procedures must track the normative truth about what we politically ought to do. This means that a political decision does not become the correct one merely because it is the outcome of a democratic procedure. Whether a given decision is correct or incorrect is independent from the procedure that was chosen to make the decision. Employing a procedure-independent standard of correctness is the distinctive feature of what we can call *veritistic* epistemic democracy.[5]

Estlund argues neither that democratic procedures are *very* reliable – that is, that they track the normative truth with anything close to certainty – nor that they are the *most* reliable procedures, in purely epistemic terms, that we can employ to make political decisions. Other procedures might surpass democracy in this respect, for

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[4] Cf. Nelson (2008). On the one hand, Nelson argues that the "epistemic character of procedures for decision-making can well be relevant (...) to the *legitimacy* of laws and policies" (2008, 21; original emphasis). On the other hand, he maintains that "problems arise when we turn from the ideal to the actual, for not only do real-world institutions lack the relevant properties, it also seems unlikely that they will easily acquire them" (2008, 30f.).

[5] I borrow this term from Peter (2008).

example one that weighs citizens' judgements according to their political knowledge. Estlund thinks that these arrangements will be ruled out because they violate some other conditions for legitimacy – this is where procedural fairness comes back in. On Estlund's account, democracy's arguably more reliable contenders violate a "qualified acceptability requirement": no procedure that weighs citizens' judgements according to some criteria of competence will find the approval of all qualified points of view. Therefore, they do not meet a necessary condition for legitimacy. It bears mentioning, however, that this condition invokes moral considerations, not epistemic ones. In this sense, although Estlund provides a *partially epistemic justification* for democracy, his epistemic *argument* for democracy is rather modest: "My argument (…) is not that some democratic form of government would be epistemically better than every alternative. Rather, it is that democracy will be the best epistemic strategy from among those that are (…) generally acceptable" (2008, 42).

Not all epistemic democrats are happy with this epistemic modesty which, according to Hélène Landemore, "concedes too much and is, furthermore, unwarranted" (2013, 51f.). Landemore agrees with Estlund that an important feature of democratic procedures is that they often yield "correct" outcomes according to some standard that is independent from the procedure itself. But she disagrees with him on the question of the relative epistemic strength of democratic procedures vis-à-vis alternative arrangements. To be sure, Landemore does not claim anything like infallibility for democracy either.[6] She does claim, however, that "given the nature of politics, [democracy] is indeed the smartest solution" to deal with collective problems (2013, 13). A group's single most important asset to find optimal solutions to these problems, she argues, is the *cognitive diversity* of its members. Landemore (2013, 102) defines cognitive diversity as

> "the difference in the way people will approach a problem or a question. It denotes more specifically a diversity of perspectives (the way of representing situations and problems), diversity of interpretations (the way of categorizing and partitioning perspectives), diversity of heuristics (the

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[6] In this regard, both Landemore and Estlund distance themselves from Rousseau, who is often seen as "the patron saint of epistemic democrats" (Schwartzberg 2015, 192). In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau (1997 [1762]) famously argued that the general will cannot err, and that citizens who were outvoted thereby learn that they were wrong. Neither Landemore's nor Estlund's view intends to imply such a strong form of epistemic deference, although some have raised concerns whether they can avoid such an implication (cf. Ingham 2012).

way of generating solutions to problems), and diversity of predictive models (the way of inferring cause and effect)."

The argument from cognitive diversity draws crucially on the *Diversity Trumps Ability Theorem* (Hong and Page 2004, 16386), which asserts that "a random collection of agents drawn from a large set of limited-ability agents typically outperforms a collection of the very best agents from that same set." Democracy is epistemically superior because it cashes out the plurality of approaches to given political problems better than any alternative political arrangement, including all feasible forms of expert rule. Thus, Landemore's *epistemic argument* for democracy is more ambitious than Estlund's insofar as she does not think that democracy has to concede defeat to any contender even if the comparison proceeds on purely epistemic terms. At the same time, it is less clear to what extent Landemore provides an *epistemic justification* of democracy. For Estlund, there would be no democratic legitimacy if the (modest) epistemic argument for democracy fails. For Landemore, there arguably could still be democratic legitimacy if her (ambitious) epistemic argument fails. At least, she leaves open the possibility that, absent the epistemic rationale, other (presumably moral) considerations could jump in to save the day. "The epistemic argument simply gives an additional, instrumental rationale," she says. However, "epistemic approaches never claimed to offer the whole story about democracy" (2017a, 289).[7]

Both Estlund and Landemore employ a veritistic conception of epistemic value. On their view, there is a normative truth about what ought to be done politically, at least regarding some issues. The epistemic value of a procedure is a function of how reliably it tracks this normative truth. However, the idea that political procedures ought to track the "truth" or yield "correct" outcomes according to a procedure-independent standard easily rings the alarm bells among liberal political philosophers. Hannah Arendt, in her essay "Truth and Politics" (2006 [1967]), famously argued that truth claims in the political sphere invoke the threat of despotism,[8] and John

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[7] Of course, Landemore need not and does not deny that the epistemic argument *could* go all the way to justify democracy. My point is only that she does not commit herself to this view. She contends herself with offering a spectrum of options: "At a minimum, to the extent that the goal of a justification for democracy is simply to establish the value of democracy as an instrumentally desirable regime, an argument showing that democracy has strong epistemic properties can only be welcome. At a maximum, the argument can reinforce, if not altogether establish, the legitimacy of democratic authority" (2013, 6).

[8] It is *claims* to truth, rather than the *acknowledgement* of rational and factual truths that have a "despotic character," Arendt writes. "The modes of thought and communication that deal with truth, if

Rawls anchored his *Political Liberalism* (1993) in an attitude of epistemic absti-nence: public justifications of policy ought not to rely on comprehensive concep-tions of the truth because any such conception will be subject to disagreement among reasonable people with pluralist outlooks on the world. Accordingly, a fre-quently raised objection holds that a procedure-independent standard of correctness has no role to play in the justification of democracy because it is this very standard that citizens will disagree on – and reasonably so.[9]

In response, veritistic epistemic democrats argue that this objection rests on an overly narrow and unnecessarily demanding notion of truth. They claim that "truth can be interpreted in such a way as to be perfectly compatible with democracy" (Da-laqua 2017, 64). Democratic procedures ought to track the normative truth *in some sense*, but veritistic epistemic democrats deny that this commits them to any meta-physically expansive conception of normative facts.[10] A much more minimalist ac-count of truth will do. For one thing, the procedure-independent standard of cor-rectness veritistic epistemic democrats employ can be heavily dependent on historical or cultural contexts. Moreover, they need not claim that all political decisions can be evaluated according to this standard. For instance, when a community has a vote on whether the new public library should be painted blue or green, it might well be the case that there is no "correct" answer to this question. However, not all political questions are merely about polling individual taste preferences. When the commu-nity has a vote on whether to build a public library in the first place, citizens need to balance several considerations about how this might bear on common interests. Building a library might incur a public deficit and restrain the municipality's options to invest in other (perhaps more urgent) infrastructure projects. But it might also make the town more attractive, become a popular meeting place, revitalise the shop-ping streets, et cetera. It might not be possible to determine ex ante (and maybe not even ex post) which is the best option for the community. However, this does not mean that there is no correct answer to the question of whether or not the commu-nity should build the library, even if we concede that it is correct only with respect

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seen from the political perspective, are necessarily domineering: they don't take into account other people's opinions, and taking these into account is the hallmark of all strictly political thinking" (2006 [1967], 241).

[9] For versions of this objection, cf. Peter (2008), Buck (2012), Ingham (2012), Saffon and Urbinati (2013), Schwartzberg (2015), Hill (2016), Lever and Chin (2017), and Gerlsbeck (2018).

[10] Presumably, the only second-order normative view with which this claim would be incompatible is some form of noncognitivism (cf. Landemore 2013, chapter 8).

to a specific set of individuals at a specific time and place.[11] If no answer to any political question were truth-apt even in this minimal sense, the very practice of deliberating about politics seems to become a pointless endeavour. As Estlund and Landemore (2018, 113) put it, "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" (cf. also Habermas 2009, 98f.; Fuerstein 2020, 379).

2.4 Conciliationist epistemic democracy

Still, the procedure-independent standard of correctness remains something like the apple of discord between veritistic epistemic democrats and other democratic theorists, including other epistemic democrats. Twenty years ago, Christian List and Robert Goodin (2001, 280) might have been right when they deemed the procedure-independent standard of correctness "the hallmark of the epistemic approach, in all its forms." Now, this description is not accurate anymore. Some epistemic democrats explicitly reject this standard. For instance, Fabienne Peter (2013, 2016) and Martin Ebeling (2017) claim for democracy a kind of epistemic value that is not veritistic. On this picture, democratic procedures, rather than "tracking the truth," are the epistemically most rational way to make collective decisions when no individual knows what the truth is. Drawing on recent arguments in social epistemology, they contend that citizens find themselves in a situation in which, first, they are in permanent political disagreement with others, and second, no citizen can claim the epistemic authority to settle these disagreements. In such a situation, there is epistemic value in a procedure that treats citizens as equal epistemic authorities. Citizens have epistemic reasons to adjust their political judgements, even if, as a result of the adjustment, they end up with less accurate beliefs (from a God's eye perspective inaccessible to them) than they held initially.[12] For Peter and Ebeling, democratic procedures are justified

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[11] One way to think about the distinction between these two kinds of political questions is in terms of "aggregation issues" and "judgement issues" (Wall 2007). Not all political questions might fall into the latter category, that is, there might not be a uniquely correct solution in these cases (cf. Saunders 2010b, 13ff.). However, veritistic epistemic democrats only need to maintain that *some* political issues are judgement issues. Estlund (2010, 54ff.) goes one step further and argues that politics consists predominantly of judgement issues.

[12] For a related view, cf. Hannon (2019), who defends what he calls "epistemic value pluralism." On this account, "tracking the truth" is not the sole purpose of democratic deliberation. Rather, part of its value resides in its capacity to promote "empathetic understanding" among ideologically mixed groups.

insofar as they are an epistemically appropriate response to political disagreement. The crucial difference to the views advanced by Estlund and Landemore is that, on this picture, the epistemic value of democracy does not consist in a certain reliability to discover a procedure-independent truth. Rather, democracy's value is *conciliatory*: it consists in a conciliation of judgements among citizens none of whom has the epistemic (let alone moral, or practical) authority to impose their own judgement as correct.

This version of epistemic democracy generates some new problems, however. In particular, it assumes that political disagreements among citizens can plausibly be conceptualised as "peer disagreements." In social epistemology, two individuals are regarded as peers either if they are, with respect to a given issue, equally familiar with and equally competent in assessing the evidence (cf. Kelly 2005; Sosa 2010; Lackey 2013) or if they are equally likely to be right on the issue (cf. Elga 2007). According to some (e.g. Christensen 2007; Elga 2007; Cohen 2013), instances of peer disagreement rationally require the participants of the disagreement to significantly adjust their credence in their initially held beliefs and potentially even to suspend judgement. These *conciliationist* views contrast with so called *steadfast* views (e.g. Kelly 2005), which deny that peer disagreements have this kind of epistemic significance. Instead, they hold it permissible for the participants of the disagreement to maintain their initially held judgement without lowering their credence levels.

When talking about peer disagreement, social epistemologists typically consider theoretical questions, that is, cases where all that is at stake are individuals' rational doxastic attitudes.[13] But political questions are practical: what is at stake is what is rational for citizens to *do*. Political philosophers who aim to provide a conciliationist epistemic justification of democracy therefore face at least two challenges: first, they need to show that at least some political disagreements among citizens fall into the category of peer disagreements. Second, they need to show that an attitude broadly qualifying as conciliationist is the rational response to this kind of peer disagreement. Even if conciliationism is the right approach to peer disagreements about theoretical questions, it cannot simply be taken for granted that it is also the right approach to practical questions, either moral or political.[14] Conciliationist epistemic democrats

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[13] The most widely discussed example is the "restaurant case" (Christensen 2007) where two friends, equally competent in calculus and only moderately drunk, disagree about the amount due.

[14] In moral philosophy, some people who accept (or at least do not reject) conciliationism as the appropriate norm for peer disagreements about non-moral questions explicitly reject it for moral disagreements (cf. Kalderon 2005; Sherman 2014; Locke 2017). To the extent that political questions are moral questions, their arguments raise a challenge for political philosophers who aim to apply

have to come up with a plausible explanation here, and it remains to be seen whether bearing this burden is easier than defending a procedure-independent standard of correctness.

2.5 Pragmatist epistemic democracy

Finally, let us briefly look at the *pragmatist* epistemic justification of democracy (cf. Misak 2008; Talisse 2009).[15] Pragmatists share with conciliationist epistemic democrats a rejection of the idea that democracy is better than any feasible alternative at yielding correct results. But unlike conciliationists, they attempt to explain how democracy can be defended epistemically without reconceptualizing the notion of epistemic value. Robert Talisse (2009) proceeds from a set of epistemic norms that are widely shared even among individuals who frequently disagree on moral norms, such as truth-aspiration and reason-responsiveness. He argues that individuals can satisfy these and other epistemic core commitments only if certain social conditions obtain. Citizens should endorse democracy because democratic arrangements are their best bet to secure the social conditions under which they can adequately form, assess, and revise their beliefs about the world. Democracy warrants a cognitive environment in which we can rely on relevant views to be expressed, dissenting voices to be heard, facts informing public decisions to be made transparent, and the assessment of conflicting judgements to proceed in a rational fashion. For this reason, citizens who are concerned about the epistemic quality of their beliefs should accept and promote democratic institutions. "Those who would turn their backs on democracy" would thereby "betray their own practices of arguing, asserting, and defending their views" (Misak and Talisse 2014, 375).

The most serious challenge facing pragmatist epistemic democracy is the question whether the route they choose gets them to the destination they set out for. After all, their goal is quite specific: to defend a political arrangement with recurring elections, equal voting rights, a universal franchise, et cetera. At the same time, the means they choose are rather broad. Even if, due to some widely accepted epistemic norms, individuals ought to bring about a social environment that promotes the epistemic qualities of their beliefs, "there is no necessary link between the desire to hold true beliefs and a commitment to democracy in inquiry" (MacGilvray 2014, 112). To comply

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conciliationism to political disagreements. The problem with political questions is of course that they often have both a (factual) non-moral and a moral dimension.

[15] There is a much wider range of pragmatist approaches to epistemic democratic theory than I discuss here. For an overview, cf. Erman and Möller (2020).

with these broad epistemic norms, adopting a certain set of *liberal* rights might suffice, for example the freedom of press, the right to assembly, and free speech. It is less clear whether compliance with these epistemic norms also requires adopting the full set of *democratic* rights, especially equal participation rights (cf. Lever 2015). Pragmatist epistemic democrats, then, either have to concede that their approach does not privilege democracy over much less participatory regimes, including some forms of "enlightened despotism," which is presumably an unacceptable bullet to bite; or they need to explain in a lot of detail why an appropriate epistemic environment can *only* be realised if the full set of democratic institutions is in place.

Let us sum up this brief survey of different strands in epistemic democratic theory. As we have seen, one frequently raised challenge to veritistic epistemic democrats is that they need to defend the notion of a procedure-independent standard of correctness for at least some political decisions. As briefly discussed, they can offer at least some arguments to address this challenge. The other two approaches to epistemic democracy face serious challenges, too: conciliationists need to defend the idea that conciliationism is the appropriate response to political peer disagreement, if there is such a thing. And pragmatists need to explain why a commitment to a certain set of epistemic norms implies a commitment to democracy, of all things.

This does by no means establish that veritistic epistemic democracy is superior to the other two – arguing for this would require much more space. For present purposes, however, my aim is not to provide a comprehensive defence of veritistic epistemic democracy. Instead, I argue later that the cases for the voting schemes I want to reject, Standard Democracy and Epistocratic Democracy, can get off the ground only if the veritistic epistemic justification of democracy is at least somewhat plausible. If democracy is partially justified by its capacity to yield correct outcomes, the electoral exclusion of children (and maybe even of some adults) can arguably be defended if it can be shown that their enfranchisement would somehow undermine this capacity. I will argue, however, that *even if* democracy is partially about delivering correct outcomes, the disenfranchisement of children cannot be justified. Moreover, I try to show that enfranchising children is not just a matter of fairness – a "dumbing down" of democracy that our commitment to equality unfortunately commits us to – but indeed a way to enhance the epistemic reliability of democratic procedures regarding at least some political issues. In a nutshell, I argue that regardless of what you think about the veritistic epistemic justification of democracy, you should not reject my proposal for Ageless Democracy. If you accept veritistic epistemic democracy, you should welcome the enfranchisement of children for the very same epistemic reasons that recommend the enfranchisement of all adult citizens. If

you reject veritistic epistemic democracy, you preclude yourself from making the most plausible argument for disenfranchising children from the outset: if democracy is not about the quality of outcomes, you cannot justify excluding a certain group of people by appealing to their alleged incompetence to vote. Elaborating these claims will be the task of later chapters.

To my knowledge, the view that an epistemic conception of democracy implies making the electorate more inclusive than it currently is has not yet been explored. Much more common is the opposite view, according to which an epistemic conception of democracy implies a less inclusive electorate. It is this view I shall introduce next.

3. The Lure of Epistocracy

If we accept the idea that the legitimacy of a political procedure hinges, at least in part, on its capacity to yield normatively correct outcomes, a follow-up question naturally arises: are the procedures that most reliably produce the right outcomes really democratic? An arrangement in which, in Jeremy Bentham's famous phrase, *everybody counts for one and nobody for more than one* might be well-designed for a number of purposes: for example, it might be an apt expression of the moral equality of all citizens and ensure that everyone enjoys an appropriate degree of civil liberty. But is it also a recipe for arriving at the most rational collective decisions? At first glance, this seems implausible. If we are primarily concerned with the quality of outcomes, it seems that the much better strategy would be to give more decision-making power to citizens who stand out in virtue of their superior knowledge, skill, and competence. Accordingly, this strategy would imply giving less or even no power to citizens with no epistemic credentials. In other words, veritistic epistemic democrats' concern for the quality of outcomes might end up recommending a political arrangement that is not very democratic: "if the good outcome is the value of democratic procedures, (…) epistemic democracy would first turn out to devalue voting and then prefer not to have universal suffrage" (Knight et al. 2016, 152).

If you think that this is where the path of veritistic epistemic democracy leads to, you have two options: turn on your heels or embrace the new destination. The first option is taken by theorists who seek to find a justification for democratic procedures. If the veritistic epistemic conception of democracy turns out, arguably, to lead them astray in that pursuit, they take this to be a *reductio ad absurdum* of this

conception of democracy. On this view, the epistemic turn in deliberative democracy must be followed by a "democratic U-turn" (Palumbo 2012).

Some, however, prefer the second option. They accept the veritistic epistemic conception of democracy but argue that employing such a conception will not vindicate but rather undermine the justification of democratic procedures. On this view, veritistic epistemic considerations strongly suggest replacing democracy with an arrangement in which "political power is formally distributed according to competence, skill, and the good faith to act on that skill" (Brennan 2017, 14). As noted above, the current literature now commonly refers to such arrangements as *episto-cratic*.

If epistemic democrats are the unruly children of deliberative democrats, then epistocrats are the even more difficult offspring of epistemic democrats. Indeed, the term "epistocracy" was first coined by Estlund (2003). Based on the Greek word ἐπιστήμη *(episteme)*, it literally means "the rule of the knowers."[16] The idea that "the knowers" should rule is of course anything but new. In Book VI of *The Republic*, Plato formulated his classical critique of democracy by drawing a famous analogy between ruling a state and navigating a ship at sea: both require skills that can only be obtained through careful practice and experience. The complexity of the task of ruling, Plato suggests, implies that the government of the state can only be entrusted with "philosopher kings," a tiny elite of the wisest and most virtuous citizens. In the twenty-first century, this proposal might be more of interest to classicists than to people who study institutional design, but contemporary proponents of epistocracy do not endorse Plato's extreme version of elite guardianship anyway. They retain the democratic commitment to *the rule of the many*. At the same time, they deny that *all* citizens should hold formal political power, or at least that all citizens should hold *the same quantity* of formal political power. They try to contrive an alternative political arrangement that retains what's attractive about democracy while correcting for its putative shortcomings.

The trouble with democracy, epistocrats argue, is that it adopts an inapt procedure to determine high-stakes political decisions, which severely impact the lives of all citizens. Epistocrats share with veritistic epistemic democrats the conviction that only epistemically reliable procedures can yield legitimate outcomes. But they deny

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[16] Estlund (2008, 277, fn. 17) notes that "epistemocracy" would be the etymologically more accurate term but this "seems too high a price." Interestingly, the term epistemocracy has actually been used by Terrence Ball (1988, 115–20), although in a slightly different sense, as Nadia Urbinati (2014, 252, fn. 68) points out.

that this conviction is compatible with endorsing a procedure that gives all adult citizens an equal vote. Citizens in democratic societies are not remotely one another's epistemic peers when it comes to politics, they argue. A procedure that does not differentiate between the votes of the least informed and the best-informed citizens is bound to produce epistemically inferior outcomes when compared to a procedure that privileges the votes of informed citizens in some way. Accordingly, epistocrats think that the epistemic *conception* of democracy is on the right track while the epistemic *argument* for democracy is on the wrong track. Indeed, epistemic arguments suggest replacing democratic with epistocratic procedures.

Epistocracy could come in several forms. The *locus classicus* of the idea that citizens with certain credentials should receive additional votes is John Stuart Mill's *Considerations on Representative Government* (2008 [1861]). Mill suggested that the weight of citizens' votes should depend on their occupations.[17] For a contemporary reader, this might sound (almost) as unpalatable as Plato's plea for philosopher kings, but some authors have tried to update Mill's proposal to design a more balanced plural-voting scheme (cf. Harwood 1998; Fudge and Quinn 2001; Mulligan 2018). Alternatively, meeting a certain threshold of political competence could be a prerequisite for being enfranchised in the first place. Just like citizens have to get a driver's licence before they can legally drive, they would have to pass an exam similar to a citizenship test to get the right to vote (Caplan 2009; Brennan 2011a; Moyo 2018). What almost all forms of epistocracy have in common is that they abandon the principle of *one person, one vote*.[18]

Proponents of epistocracy constitute a growing but still small minority among political theorists. Most people reject it. The strategies that have been employed to

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[17] "An employer of labour is on the average more intelligent than a labourer; for he must labour with his head, and not solely with his hands. A foreman is generally more intelligent than an ordinary labourer, and a labourer in the skilled trades than in the unskilled. A banker, merchant, or manufacturer, is likely to be more intelligent than a tradesman, because he has larger and more complicated interests to manage. (...) Subject to some condition, two or more votes might be allowed to any person who exercises any of these superior functions" (Mill 2008, 336).

[18] There are a few exceptions. Jeffrey (2018) has suggested a "limited epistocracy" that maintains equal voting rights but grants additional executive power to "expert institutions" like the WHO or the IMF. On another approach, executives would use data on citizens' actual policy preferences, their levels of political competence, and their demographic information to statistically determine the policy preferences of a fully informed electorate while correcting for demographic and socioeconomic factors such as race, gender, and wealth (Brennan 2017, 220ff.; Ahlstrom-Vij 2020a). Cf. Holst (2012) for an overview of other forms of epistocracy.

refute epistocratic proposals broadly fall into three categories: an epistemic, a moral, and a pragmatic one.

The first strategy is to deny the core claim of epistocrats, namely that an episto-cratic reallocation of political power would lead to better political decisions. This argument can take three shapes. The first one, which we may call positive epistemic, emphasizes the epistemic strengths of democracy. Here, the claim is that democracy is epistemically superior to any feasible form of epistocracy (cf. Mackie 2012; Lan-demore 2014; Min 2015; Goodin and Spiekermann 2018). In contrast, negative ep-istemic arguments emphasize the epistemic weaknesses of epistocracy. Here, the claim is that any feasible form of epistocracy will incur some deficiencies that demo-cratic procedures avoid, such that epistocracy is inferior to democracy (cf. Gunn 2014, 2019; Arlen and Rossi 2018; Moraro 2018; Reiss 2019; Umbers 2019; Vandamme 2019; Bhatia 2020). This line of argument is compatible with the claim that democratic procedures are not particularly epistemically reliable either. A third version of the epistemic argument against epistocracy holds that it is impossible to identify the subset of citizens who should hold additional political power because we will never be able to agree on a standard for assessing the relevant kind of expertise. "The rule of the knowers" fails because we do not and cannot know who the knowers are (cf. Misak 2008; Viehoff 2016).

The second strategy to refute epistocratic proposals is to argue that they are mor-ally unacceptable. A first version of the moral argument holds that epistemic consid-erations are irrelevant for choosing between democratic and epistocratic procedures because the latter are ruled out for moral reasons that constrain our pursuit of the best outcomes. On this view, epistemic reasons to adopt epistocratic procedures (even if they are strong) are pre-empted because these procedures fail to meet a lexi-cally prior condition of moral acceptability (cf. Christiano 2001; Estlund 2008). A second version of the moral argument essentially holds that if epistocracy is the an-swer, there must be something wrong with the question. On this view, there is no procedure-independent standard to assess political decisions, so the "better out-comes" in whose name epistocrats want to privilege the judgements of knowledgea-ble citizens are chimeric. Thus, epistocracy is good for nothing. Worse still, discount-ing some citizens' formal political power is incompatible with some paramount moral value, such as fairness, equality, or civil liberty (cf. González-Ricoy 2012; Rob-inson 2017; Blunt 2020).

Finally, the third strategy to argue against epistocracy is to deny its feasibility. Any attempt to implement a specific form of epistocracy would do more harm than good in practice. A first version of this pragmatic argument holds that implementing

epistocratic procedures might have devastating consequences for political stability, for example because citizens would not accept the outcomes of the procedures as binding (cf. Lippert-Rasmussen 2012; Talisse 2019a). A second version of this argument holds that implementing epistocratic procedures incurs a substantial risk of abuses of power, either by those who get to determine the criteria for holding additional power or by those who receive additional power in virtue of these criteria (cf. Bagg 2018; Klocksiem 2019; Somin 2019).

The epistemic, moral, and pragmatic strategies are not incompatible. In fact, they often overlap and supplement one another.[19] Be that as it may, most democratic theorists are confident that at least one such argument or combination of arguments yields a conclusive refutation of the epistocratic proposal. However, there is disagreement about which ones do and which ones do not work. Presumably, most democrats think that pragmatic arguments suffice to reject epistocracy. But if it turned out that *only* pragmatic arguments succeed, democrats would have to make far-reaching concessions to epistocrats: they would have to admit both that epistocracy might be epistemically superior to democracy and that there is nothing morally wrong with it, or at least not to the extent that epistocracy is illegitimate. It would only be due to some features of political reality that an implementation of the epistocratic proposal is undesirable. This would imply that our ultimate commitment to democracy is not very robust. We should stick with it merely because (and as long as) some practical obstacles to realizing a better form of government remain.

This looks like a sobering result. To provide a more principled defence of democracy, democratic theorists need to show that, in addition to the pragmatic line, moral or epistemic arguments are successful against epistocracy too. Presumably, most democratic theorists think that there are also sufficiently strong moral arguments to reject epistocracy. But if it turned out that *only* pragmatic and moral arguments succeed, democrats might still have to concede that, from a purely epistemic perspective, epistocracy would be superior. The most sweeping success for democrats, then, would be to show that we can reject epistocracy with a *positive epistemic argument for democracy*. This is the most ambitious line democrats can take because it grants epistocrats (albeit perhaps just for the sake of argument) that their proposal is practically feasible and morally acceptable. By adopting a purely epistemic approach, it attempts to defeat epistocrats "on their home ground." Many are sceptical, however,

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[19] For example, one can make moral arguments against epistocracy based on both epistemic and pragmatic considerations: one could hold that we *morally* ought to endorse democratic procedures *because* they are epistemically most reliable or *because* they warrant political stability, for instance.

whether democrats can go that far. Only epistemic democrats of a particular kind, namely ambitious veritistic ones like Landemore,[20] take this strong line against epistocracy. Others, like Estlund, retreat to moral arguments to answer the question of "why not epistocracy?"

4. Standard Democracy's Predicament

Many contemporary democratic theorists do not just reject epistocracy; they are strongly dismissive of it. Epistocracy is being called a "wolf in wolf's clothing" (Klocksiem 2019), its very idea "morally disgusting" (Robinson 2017), and the argument for it "simplistic and overblown" (Gunn 2014, 62). These and other authors empathetically emphasize that voting rights ought to be allocated equally: all citizens who have the right to vote should have the same voting power. It bears emphasizing, however, that most democratic theorists do not hold that all citizens should have the right to vote to begin with. They do not defend *one person, one vote* without restrictions, but rather some form of Standard Democracy where citizens below a certain age are excluded from the electorate. Accordingly, Standard Democrats make two essential commitments: on the one hand, they are opposed to epistocracy; on the other hand, they endorse a voting age. In brief, Standard Democracy is the view that *all* and *only* adults[21] should have the right to vote. However, if the epistocratic proposal is so horrific, why is the flat exclusion of people below a certain age unproblematic or even required?

In this section, my aim is to show that Standard Democracy's two commitments are in tension. Later (in chapter 6), I will go much further and argue that they are indeed incompatible. For now, I merely want to motivate the subsequent discussion

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[20] In a different sense, conciliationist epistemic democrats also make an ambitious epistemic argument for democracy. On their view, democratic procedures are epistemically superior to epistocratic procedures not because they yield better outcomes but because they are the more rational response to political peer disagreement. But this line of argument does not meet epistocrats "on their home ground" because it employs a different conception of epistemic value.

[21] Throughout this work, I employ a generic distinction between "adults" and "children": I use the term "adults" simply as shorthand for "citizens above the voting age." In turn, everyone below the voting age counts as a "child." This means that Standard Democrats need *not* commit themselves to a particular voting age. To repeat, a democracy in which all citizens above the age of 5 have the right to vote would still be a form of Standard Democracy, on my account. In that case, six-year olds would count as "adults."

by pointing out the basic problem for Standard Democrats: objections to epistocracy, if successful, complicate the case for the voting age; and arguments for the voting age, if successful, complicate the case against epistocracy.

The first thing to note is that Standard Democrats are in the same dialectical position vis-à-vis the opponent of the voting age as epistocrats are against Standard Democrats: they bear the burden of proof. They must offer a compelling argument for why the restriction on the right to vote they advocate for is justified.[22] In other words, while Standard Democrats can win the game against the epistocrat by merely playing defence – all they need are successful *objections to* the epistocratic proposal – they need to play offence to win the game against the opponent of the voting age: they need to provide successful *arguments for* the disenfranchisement of everyone below a certain age.

Standard Democrats might object against this distribution of roles. They could argue that the burden of proof is always on those who seek to change the status quo. All democratic countries employ a voting age, so it is the opponents of this practice, not Standard Democrats, who need to play offence. The opponents need to show that this deeply entrenched feature of democracy is inadequate.

On the other hand, the debate about epistocracy reveals that many, if not most contemporary democratic theorists endorse an egalitarian and inclusive approach to voting rights. According to this view, citizens have, by default, a right to have a say in collective decisions, and everyone who opposes this default has to make a compelling argument for why some citizens should not have a say, or merely a discounted one. Epistocrats argue exactly that, and, as we have seen, Standard Democrats raise various objections to them. In the debate with the opponent of the voting age, however, it is the Standard Democrat who does not want to concede voting rights to a certain group of citizens. The debate is thus exactly parallel to the one about epistocracy, with the only difference that Standard Democrats stand on the other side: they argue for a restriction on the inclusive and egalitarian approach to enfranchisement they otherwise endorse. Deviating from their general approach requires a justification. Unless they can provide one, the default is the absence of the restriction in question. This would also entail that, should the controversy with the opponent of the voting age result in reasonable disagreement, the default solution is *not* to disenfranchise citizens below a certain age.

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[22] In chapter 4, I give an argument for why epistocrats bear the burden of proof vis-à-vis Standard Democrats.

Obviously, this is not how the debate about the voting age, to the extent that there is one, actually proceeds. Perhaps unsurprisingly, most people, including democratic theorists, are deeply sceptical of the idea to give all citizens, regardless of age, the right to vote. The electoral exclusion of children is, as mentioned earlier, one of the few things that democracies across times and places have always converged on. For that reason, it seems natural to shift the burden of proof to anyone who seriously wishes to question this practice. Indeed, a general assumption seems to be that unless someone makes an extremely convincing case against the voting age, it is justifiable to stick with it.

I argue that this assumption is mistaken. The fact that all democratic countries employ a voting age might *explain* why the burden of proof gets shifted to those who oppose it; but it does not *warrant* this shift. In this respect, opponents of the voting age are in a similar dialectical position as previous advocates of the extension of the franchise. To name two particularly prominent historical examples, both the suffragette movement and the civil rights movement had to run against the firm opposition of the defenders of the status quo. Due to existing power structures and thinking habits in the societies they lived in, the actual burden was on them to make a convincing case for their demands. From a philosophical perspective, however, it seems obvious that things should have been the other way round: if anyone, those who *opposed* the enfranchisement of women and African Americans, respectively, should have carried the justificatory burden. With respect to children, I suggest, the situation is comparable:[23] due to deeply entrenched social and institutional structures, the *actual* burden of justification falls onto the opponents of the voting age. However, if we proceed from some of the most widely-held commitments in contemporary political theory – the fundamental equality of all citizens, the desirability of broad participation, et cetera – the *philosophical* burden of justification falls onto the defenders of the voting age.

Citing the suffragettes and the civil rights movement as historical ancestors might be regarded as a rather presumptuous attempt to claim the moral high ground, so let me stress that, by pointing out a parallel between these movements and the case at hand, I do not want to imply that the dispute about the voting age will necessarily

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[23] There are also important dissimilarities of course. Most strikingly, in these historical examples, the excluded citizens fought for getting the right to vote *themselves*. They demanded that the franchise be extended to *them*. If children should ever get the right to vote, this would be the first large-scale extension of the franchise that had not been demanded by the previously excluded group (on a smaller scale, this already happened when many countries lowered their voting age from 21 to 18; cf. Franklin 2004, 213).

yield the same result. In the case of women and African Americans, no reasonable person can deny that their disenfranchisement was and always had been unjust. In fact, we might question, in retrospect, whether countries deserved to be regarded as "democracies" before these groups were enfranchised. In the case of children, nothing I have said so far rules out the possibility that their disenfranchisement *does* turn out to be just. The fact that, historically, advocates of further extensions of the franchise have a better track record than their opponents does not mean that they are always right. In other words, it is possible that Standard Democrats can bear the justificatory burden that falls on them. Thus far, I merely claim that the burden indeed falls on them.

It may seem like the task of justifying the voting age is not very difficult. After all, there seems to be an obvious reason why young citizens should not have the right to vote: they lack the knowledge, maturity, or competence (or something of that sort) that voting requires. The decisions we make when we vote are, even if not individually, collectively tremendously consequential and highly complex. It is very important that the collective body that is entrusted with these decisions, the electorate, is up to the task. For that reason, we ought to make sure that the members of the electorate are, by and large, sufficiently well-informed, rational, and far-sighted to engage with the difficult issues of government. Below a certain age, citizens do not possess whatever level of competency is necessary to exercise the right to vote responsibly. Therefore, Standard Democrats might argue, people below that age should not be permitted to vote.

Perhaps an argument along these lines is plausible. However, it eerily resembles the argument that epistocrats, allegedly unsuccessfully, raise against Standard Democrats. Recall that epistocrats make a lot of the high-stakes character of the political decisions facing the electorate, and a key claim of their argument is that many citizens – adult citizens! – do not know enough about politics to be entitled to a say when these decisions are being made. In a sense, epistocrats argue that when it comes to politics, many adult citizens are children. And regardless of what you otherwise think of the argument for epistocracy, the claim that many adults do not have whatever level of competence is required to be a responsible voter is firmly grounded in empirical research: "if six decades of modern public opinion research establish anything, it is that the public's most basic political knowledge is appalling by any normative standard" (Ackerman and Fishkin 2002, 133).[24] Still, as we have seen, Standard Democrats reject the proposal to disenfranchise any adult citizens (or to discount their

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[24] I return to the issue of widespread political ignorance in chapter 3.

votes). Either for epistemic, moral, or pragmatic reasons, they insist that all adult citizens should have the same voting power. But if they are right to do so, then of course we might ask why the same reasons do not also apply to citizens below a certain age: if any adult citizen ought to have the right to vote, regardless of whether they are politically competent by whatever standard, then why should children be denied this right?

Broadly, there are two ways for Standard Democrats to respond to this question. The first is to retract what seemed to be an initially plausible justification for disenfranchising children, namely that they are insufficiently competent. On this view, the idea that the voting age is a "last, anachronistic bastion of epistocratic thought" (Tremmel and Wilhelm 2015, 144) is mistaken. Instead, the voting age has a different purpose: for instance, Standard Democrats could argue that children are not allowed to vote because they are not yet autonomous agents, or because their exclusion is necessary to protect them from the perils of political controversies, et cetera.

A second response maintains the idea that children should be disenfranchised first and foremost because they are incompetent. On this view, the voting age does have an epistocratic flavour. Standard Democrats would then agree with epistocrats that voting power should not be distributed evenly across the citizenry, and that differences in voting power should (broadly) track citizens' political competence. To maintain their position between epistocracy on the one hand and Ageless Democracy on the other, they would then have to argue that the voting age is an *acceptable* way to allocate voting power to sufficiently competent citizens, while the epistocratic proposal, even in its strongest form, is unacceptable.

5. Outlook

Ultimately, my aim is to reject both approaches to defend Standard Democracy. I will argue that the middle ground Standard Democrats seek to occupy – defending the enfranchisement of *all* adults against the epistocrat on one side and the enfranchisement of *only* adults against the opponent of the voting age on the other – is untenable. They have to give up one of their two core commitments, and the central claim I make is that they should abandon their commitment to the flat disenfranchisement of children, not to the flat enfranchisement of adults. In chapter 6, I will argue that even the most plausible attempt to defend both commitments simultaneously fails. And chapter 7 will argue that a defeatist objection Standard Democrats might be inclined to make – even if there is no solid theoretical justification for the

electoral exclusion of children, we all know that democracy works a lot better if we keep them excluded – is mistaken too. Before I get to this part of the argument, however, I need to show that Standard Democrats should not in fact go the other direction and forfeit their commitment to the equal enfranchisement of all adults. In other words, I first have to rule out the epistocratic option before I move on to the positive case for Ageless Democracy. And before I can rule out the epistocratic option, I have to consider it in its strongest form. This will be the aim of the next two chapters. In chapter 2, I develop what I take to be the most compelling version of the epistocratic proposal. In chapter 3, I explore potential reasons for adopting it.

Features of Epistocratic Democracy

1. Introduction

In October 2018, Jair Bolsonaro won the Brazilian presidential election by a clear margin. At the time of his victory, he was no unknown quantity. In 27 years as a congressman, Bolsonaro had become infamous for repeatedly insulting ethnic minorities, homosexuals, and women. A declared admirer of the military dictatorship that maltreated the country from 1964 to 1985, he openly incited his supporters to assault his political opponents during the election campaign. Nevertheless, he received 55 percent of the votes in the run-off election. On the day after, newspaper readers in many democratic countries woke up to similar headlines. The German *Die Zeit*, for instance, spoke of "Brazilian Self-Destruction." Subtitle: "Why do so many people vote against their own interests?"[1]

Two years later, the implications of Bolsonaro's election have started to materialise: in 2019, Brazil lost approximately 12,000 km^2 of Amazonian rain forest, which stores significant amounts of greenhouse gases and is of vital importance for the global climate (which Bolsonaro, almost needless to say, does not believe to be changing).[2] The devastating forest fires during the summer of that year are regarded as a

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[1] Cf. https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2018-10/praesidentschaftswahlen-brasilien-jair-bolsonaro-fernando-haddad-krise [retrieved 9 October 2018].

[2] Cf. "Studies add to alarm over deforestation in Brazil under Bolsonaro," https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/may/28/studies-add-to-alarm-over-deforestation-in-brazil-under-bolsonaro-covid-19 [retrieved 5 June 2020].

direct consequence of the new administration's environmental policies. And in 2020, Brazil has been particularly hard-hit by the COVID-19 pandemic: Bolsonaro's crisis management consisted in first denying the existence of the virus; he then fired his Secretary of Health at the height of the outbreak and responded with "So what? What do you want me to do?" when journalists confronted him with the rapidly increasing numbers of infections and deaths in the country.[3]

Bolsonaro's presidency and its consequences for the people in Brazil and beyond vividly illustrate that democratic procedures can yield markedly bad outcomes. They also illustrate how high the stakes can be: with a slightly more capable administration, decades of environmental protection efforts might not have come undone over the course of a couple of months, and thousands of lives might have been saved during the pandemic. However, even if democratic procedures incur a risk of bad and occasionally even disastrous outcomes (which, maybe due to bad luck, seem to have accumulated over the past few years), we might still think that, over the long haul, no alternative political arrangement serves the common good as well as democracy. This seems to be a widespread view. It is probably no coincidence that Winston Churchill's bon mot "Democracy is the worst form of government expect for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time" gets cited so often.

This "Churchillian complacency" (Bagg 2018, 895), however, might simply be indicative of mental laziness: maybe there are better (or less bad) forms of government that haven't been tried yet. Maybe there is a way to take what we like about democracy and incorporate it into a system that at the same time reduces the risk of every once in a while delivering a Brexit, or putting a Trump, Bolsonaro, Orban, Modi, or Duterte above us. This consideration motivates the case for epistocracy. Armed with the results of decades of research on political ignorance in democratic countries and encouraged by the increasing evidence that, arguably, this ignorance can have highly undesirable electoral consequences, epistocrats challenge the common assumption that we cannot do better than sticking with democracy anyway. In particular, it is the equal right to vote that they take issue with. Epistocrats propose to keep many democratic institutions like competitive elections, liberal rights, an independent judiciary, et cetera, but reject the idea to give every sane adult citizen one vote, regardless of how much or how little they know about politics. In an epistocratic system, "greater knowledge and the good faith to act on that knowledge are de

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[3] Cf. "COVID-19 in Brazil: 'So What?'", https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)31095-3/fulltext [retrieved 5 June 2020]. On the current state of Brazilian democracy more generally, cf. Sousa Santos (2019).

jure, legal prerequisites for holding power or are legal grounds for being granted greater power through law. (...) [B]y reducing the political power of the worst voters, epistocratic governments would deliver better, more efficient, and more substantively just results than democracies do" (Brennan 2018a, 54).

Sounds great. So why not epistocracy? As already noted, most political theorists do not at all think that epistocracy is the answer to the problems facing contemporary democracies. In fact, they dismiss this cure as probably worse than the disease (e.g. Klocksiem 2019; Reiss 2019). But what do we talk about when we talk about epistocracy? The idea to give more formal political power to citizens who meet some standard of political knowledge can be specified in numerous ways. The normative evaluation of the epistocratic proposal might hinge on this specification. Some forms of epistocracy are obviously nonstarters – recall Plato's philosopher kings and Mill's suggestion to give more votes to people with certain jobs. But this does not mean that *all* forms of epistocracy are nonstarters. In any case, to refute the epistocratic proposal tout court, it is insufficient to attack a strawman version of it. Many authors who have recently contributed to the critical literature on epistocracy have not been very sensitive to multitude of forms epistocracy can take,[4] and epistocrats like Jason Brennan have been insufficiently clear about what exact form of epistocracy they are defending.[5]

The purpose of this chapter is to shed light on the question of which form of epistocracy is the most compelling one. Once we have determined the strongest version of epistocracy and the most plausible rationale for adopting it (this will be the task of chapter 3), we can move on to provide a comprehensive critique of the epistocratic approach (in chapters 4 and 5). For that purpose, section 2 of this chapter will clarify the relation between democracy and epistocracy. I argue against the relatively common view that epistocracy is something entirely different from and thus an alternative to democracy and suggest that it is more plausible to regard it as a supplement to democracy. In section 3, I outline the main features of what I take to be the strongest proposal epistocrats can advance: a voting scheme which is *inclusive* (it allows all adult citizens to participate in the electoral process), *even* (it allows only for small differences in voting power), and *moderate* (it only makes basic knowledge demands on citizens). Most importantly, it is also *variable* (the subset of citizens who hold more voting power is issue-sensitive and varies from election to election) and

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[4] Notable exceptions are Parvin (2018a) and Vandamme (2019).

[5] Brennan (2017, 208-22) gives an overview of many of these forms but does not explicitly say which one he advocates for.

opaque (citizens do not know to whom an additional vote has been allocated in a given election). This Epistocratic Democracy, I argue, survives many of the objections that have recently been raised against somewhat impoverished versions of epistocracy. To illustrate this, section 4 discusses one example from each category of objections to epistocracy I introduced in the last chapter: an epistemic objection, made by Hélène Landemore (2013, 2014), according to which epistocracy lacks cognitive diversity; a moral objection, made by Thomas Christiano (2001, 2008), according to which epistocracy treats some citizens publicly as inferiors; and a pragmatic objection, made by Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen (2012), according to which epistocracy undermines citizens' participation that safeguards political stability. I aim to show that Epistocratic Democracy is at least less vulnerable to these objections than other forms of epistocracy.

2. Democracy, Epistocracy, and Epistocratic Democracy

At the beginning of his classic *Democracy and Its Critics*, Robert Dahl distinguishes between two kinds of critics of democracy (1989, 2). *Adversarial critics* are fundamentally opposed to democracy because they take it to be either undesirable or infeasible. In contrast, *sympathetic critics* endorse and wish to maintain democracy but seek to abolish or modify specific features of it.

Given this distinction, what category of critics do epistocrats fall into? My interest here is not with the exegetical question of what kind of critic some proponents of epistocracy take themselves to be. Rather, I am interested in which interpretation of their view renders the epistocratic challenge to democracy most forceful. In this section, I argue that the epistocratic proposal is initially much more plausible if we interpret it as a sympathetic rather than adversarial critique of democracy. In the next section, I ask which basic features an epistocratic form of democracy should have.

In the current literature, epistocrats are commonly understood to be adversarial critics of democracy. On this understanding, epistocracy is a distinct form of government that is incompatible with democracy (cf. for instance Runciman 2018, 180f.). Considering the way in which some epistocrats characterise their own view, this understanding is warranted. Brennan, for example, explicitly introduces epistocracy "as an *alternative* to democracy" (2017, xiii; my emphasis) and says that we should "*replace* democracy with (...) epistocracy" (142, my emphasis). Most notably, the title of his main work on the topic, *Against Democracy*, very unsubtly suggests that Brennan wants to abandon democracy outright. Given this sharp juxtaposition, it is

perhaps unsurprising that the debate has been rather confrontative, with epistocrats arguing "against democracy" in one corner and democrats arguing "against epistocracy" (Moraro 2018; Gunn 2019; Reiss 2019) in the other. Presented with just two stark options, it is also unsurprising that the bulk of political theorists have expressed their allegiance to the democratic camp. Who would seriously want to be "against" something whose status in today's political world is as sacrosanct as democracy's?[6]

There is another understanding of the epistocratic view, however, according to which epistocracy is a *supplement* rather than an alternative to democracy. On this understanding, the clear-cut distinction between democracy and epistocracy is misleading. As some authors (cf. Bagg 2018; Parvin 2018a; Talisse 2019a; Landa and Pevnick 2020) have pointed out, all democratic forms of government contain some epistocratic features, that is, institutionalised settings in which some citizens exercise power over others in virtue of some special competence or qualification they have. Take, for example, expert panels advising policy decisions or the institution of judicial review.[7] Likewise, any somewhat plausible form of epistocracy will retain many democratic features, such as competitive elections, basic rights, an independent judiciary, et cetera. Seen in this light, "epistocrats" and "democrats" do not disagree about which form of government to adopt. Rather, their argument is about how many, and which, epistocratic elements a democratic form of government may entail. This implies that epistocrats are sympathetic rather than adversarial critics of democracy. They endorse many or most institutions characteristic for democratic regimes but oppose some specific features of them. More specifically, most epistocrats reject the practice of giving all sane citizens above a certain age exactly one vote. They are not so much against democracy as they are against egalitarian majoritarianism.[8] Like several other political theorists who are not epistocrats (e.g. Zakaria 2004; Bell 2015; Achen and Bartels 2016; Somin 2016; Rauch and Wittes 2017; Rosenbluth

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[6] Talisse (2019b, 15) rightly points out that "the concept of democracy is thick. We use the term in part to describe things as morally upright and admirable. Correspondingly, to characterize a state of affairs as undemocratic is to describe it as unfair, illicit, improper, or worse."

[7] Although in most countries judges at constitutional courts have some kind of democratic mandate – in most cases, they are elected by one of the legislative chambers or appointed by a democratically elected office holder – the eligibility criteria are so demanding that the additional political power they hold can certainly be considered epistocratic. Becoming a constitutional judge is not open to all citizens but only to a tiny fraction of those with a law degree. As I argue below, another epistocratic element in real-world democracies is the disenfranchisement of children and mentally handicapped citizens.

[8] Admittedly, though, Brennan would certainly have sold less copies of his book and received less academic and public attention had he called his book *Against Egalitarian Majoritarianism*.

and Shapiro 2018; Rothstein 2019), they oppose Jane Addam's (1964, 11) famous dictum that "the cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy." Instead, they hold that democracy requires further constraints on the will of the majority, additional to the ones that are already in place. Thus understood, the epistocratic proposal is less radical than it is commonly perceived: rather than abolishing democracy, it merely suggests taking one further step in the direction of less egalitarian political procedures. "The question is one of the boundaries: how much intervention for the sake of epistemic enhancement does democracy permit?" (Talisse 2019a, 10). In particular, the question is whether the specific proposal some epistocrats make – to reallocate voting power according to some criteria of political competence – is a permissible and desirable modification of democratic procedures.

The issue of whether epistocracy should be interpreted as an alternative or a supplement to democracy is important because the case for it is initially much stronger on the latter interpretation. To see why, consider what a transition from a democratic to an epistocratic regime would mean in each case. Assume that a majority of eligible voters authorises, at t_1, a system in which some citizens who meet certain criteria of competence henceforth hold more voting power than citizens who don't. Now assume that, at t_2, a majority of citizens is dissatisfied with the new system, for instance because it did not yield palpable improvements or because the competence criteria keep raising controversies. How would the reverse transition – back from an epistocratic to a democratic system – work in such a scenario? Could a simple majority of *all* citizens retract the epistocratic system even if a majority of *the subset of citizens who meet the epistocratic competence criteria* wants to retain it?

If epistocracy is indeed an alternative form of government that has replaced democracy, the answer to this question is no. In that case, the shift from a democratic to an epistocratic system implies a reallocation of fundamental political power. In a democracy, all members of the demos share basic political power on equal terms. Every decision to allocate more executive decision-making power to specific citizens (most notably their representatives in parliament) is reversible. Holders of additional political power always remain at the mercy of the citizenry at large. In contrast, in an epistocracy, on this reading, the subset of citizens who meet the epistocratic criteria for holding power would not merely hold more executive decision-making power for the time being; they would hold more fundamental political power as long as this allocation is not reversed by these citizens themselves. A majority vote at t_2 would be

insufficient to abolish the epistocratic regime. What is needed is a majority of votes that constitute a quorum according to the epistocratic rules implemented at t_1.[9]

If, however, epistocracy is merely a supplement to democracy, citizens would retain their equal share of fundamental political power even after they implemented an epistocratic system at t_1. In this case, the epistocratic rules remain in place if and only if they enjoy the continuous support of the citizenry at large. A majority vote is sufficient to abolish this system, even if this majority does not constitute a quorum according to the epistocratic rules. On this reading, epistocracy remains at bottom a form of democracy. It would be inaccurate to say that, at t_1, epistocracy has *replaced* democracy. Rather, citizens have made a reversible decision to implement an epistocratic democracy whose existence beyond t_2 is conditional upon the majority opinion at that point.

The case for adopting epistocratic arrangements is much stronger if they supplement rather than replace democratic arrangements. If an epistocracy could not be revoked by democratic procedures, the argument for its superiority would have to be strong indeed. Although we might consider existing democratic institutions deficient in several respects, we also know their distinctive qualities, especially compared to "all those other forms of government that have been tried from time to time." In contrast, epistocratic institutions are untested and the implications of implementing them highly uncertain. Jeopardizing the political order for the sake of uncertain benefits is reckless even if the benefits in question are enticing. Ian Shapiro (2016, 3) sounds a familiar note of caution when he points out that "critics often underestimate the disadvantages of untried possibilities, comparing flawed existing arrangements with idealized versions of proffered alternatives."

At the same time, however, the conservative argument for sticking with the status quo whenever the benefits of a proposed reform are uncertain obviously has its limits. Especially when, as is arguably the case at present, the pathologies of existing democratic arrangements become more and more salient, we should not abandon any reform proposal merely because we lack conclusive evidence that it is desirable. Assume that epistocrats can muster a compelling argument that their reform proposal would improve the quality of collective decisions and advance the common good

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[9] Cf. Dahl's account of *guardianship*, which he explicitly frames as an alternative regime to democracy: "the theory of guardianship does not propose that we *delegate* authority to the rulers. The authority of the rulers would not be *delegated* at all. In effect, the authority to rule would be permanently *alienated*, not delegated; the people could not legally or constitutionally, or I suppose rationally or morally, recover authority whenever they might conclude that it had become desirable to do so. The only recourse would be revolution" (1989, 76; original emphasis).

more reliably than existing procedures. There is a case to be made, then, for implementing it at a small scale and in a controlled setting to get a sense of its practical suitability. Now, many will certainly deny that epistocrats can offer such an argument, but that is not the issue at present. The point is that the initial plausibility of the epistocratic proposal is much higher if we interpret it as suggesting a reform that can be controlled by the democratic institutions we know and can fall back on, if needs be. In other words, the proposal should be interpreted as a suggestion to make democracy (and more specifically voting procedures) *more epistocratic*, not to *replace* democracy with epistocracy.

Accordingly, I will henceforth employ the term "epistocracy" not to denote an alternative form of government but rather as a shorthand for "epistocratic form of democracy." As mentioned earlier, there are many different possible voting schemes that fall into this category, and the purpose of this chapter is to determine which of them is least vulnerable to some common objections to epistocracy simpliciter. The guiding question is *how* epistocracy should allocate voting power among the sane adult population. In the next section, I outline the basic features of a scheme I will call Epistocratic Democracy (capitalised).

3. Features of Epistocratic Democracy

3.1 Inclusiveness

Some forms of epistocracy, call them *exclusionary*, seek to improve the quality of electoral outcomes by restricting the electorate (cf. Caplan 2009; Brennan 2011a; Moyo 2018, 197). On this approach, all citizens are disenfranchised by default. The right to vote is conceded to a citizen if and only if she passes a voter qualification exam. Citizens who do not take the exam or fail it remain excluded.

Exclusionary epistocracy is subject to some straightforward complaints just by virtue of being exclusionary. First, the history of democracy is a history of extensions of the franchise, and universal voting rights for all adult citizens are commonly regarded as a major historical achievement. "The right of voting for representatives," Thomas Paine wrote amid the Age of Revolutions, is a "property of the most sacred kind. (...) To take away this right is to reduce a man to a state of slavery" (1995 [1795], 397f.). This view has become deeply entrenched in our political culture. Ronald Dworkin (2000, 200ff.) has argued that it is precisely its historical pedigree that explains the high symbolic importance the right to vote has for us: because we are well aware of

the struggles and the toll of lives without which extensions of the franchise would not have been achieved in Western societies, restrictions of the right to vote seem intolerable to us. Excluding citizens from the electorate has the flavour of a relapse into times that we think are long overcome. Exclusionary epistocracy thus incurs grave symbolic costs.

Second, political decisions affect everyone who lives in a polity. Denying someone a say in these decisions is like incapacitating them in matters of their own business. In other words, excluding anyone tout court violates the *all-affected principle* according to which everyone who is affected by the jurisdiction of a polity should be allowed to participate in the political processes that produce this jurisdiction.[10] Denying someone the right to vote expresses disregard not just for their capacity to judge what's in the public interest but also to judge what's in their own interest. Making political decisions without taking everyone's judgement into account effectively fails to treat some people with due respect and degrades them to second-class citizens (cf. Mill 2008 [1861], 335; Griffin 2003, 120; Ottonelli 2012, 203).

Inclusive forms of epistocracy avoid or at least mitigate these problems. On a plural voting scheme, all adult citizens retain a default number of votes (most naturally one); those with specific qualifications, however, receive additional voting power.[11] To rephrase Bentham: everybody counts for one, but some for more than one. Every citizen is entitled to a say in collective decisions, but the weight of their say varies according to their political competence. This approach accommodates the all-affected principle, shows at least some regard for the judgement of each individual

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[10] Cf. Goodin (2007). For a survey of this principle, cf. Näsström (2011). Note that the all-affected principle is normally employed as an approach to determine the limits of the *demos*, not of the electorate. As such, it is an attempted solution to the famous "boundary problem" in democratic theory (cf. Whelan 1983). In this work, I do not engage with this problem. Throughout, I assume that we know the limits of the demos and ask the more specific question of which members of the demos should also be members of the electorate.

[11] For present purposes, I assume that all forms of plural voting are epistocratic, that is, that additional votes will be allocated according to some standard of political competence. However, there could also be non-epistocratic plural voting schemes. For instance, Latimer (2018) outlines (but does not endorse) *procedural plural voting*, a process where citizens may first select any eligible voter, including themselves, who they want to give an additional vote to. At the election stage, citizens vote for the actual policies or candidates with one vote plus whatever number of votes has been allocated to them at the selection stage. Likewise, a system in which votes are "distributed in proportion to people's stakes in the decision under consideration," as suggested by Brighouse and Fleurbaey (2010, 137), might also assign plural votes to some people, not because they are more competent, but rather since they are disproportionately affected by the outcome of the vote.

citizen, and avoids the symbolic problems of disenfranchisement. To be sure, discounting some citizens' votes might incur symbolic costs in its own right (cf. Goodin and Spiekermann 2018, 233f.). For inclusive epistocracy to have a comparative advantage over its exclusionary counterpart, however, all that is needed is that these costs are not as grave.

Another advantage of inclusive epistocracy is that it implies less radical changes to the status quo. All citizens will still be entitled to participate in electoral procedures. Nobody who used to have the right to vote will now be denied access to the ballots. Both exclusionary and inclusive epistocracy introduce differences in voting power between citizens, but the latter makes them less palpable. Presumably, this reduces the risk that the new voting scheme could be publicly opposed.

3.2 Evenness

Although they formally afford voting rights to all citizens, some specifications of a plural voting scheme would effectively disenfranchise a part of the electorate. Consider a case in which politically competent citizens can acquire so many additional votes that they effectively "swamp" everyone else's votes. This renders the right to vote of citizens who do not meet the competence criteria virtually meaningless. The fact that Amy, Bradley, and Claudia all have a vote is rather insignificant when Doris has 1,000 votes.

Accordingly, inclusive epistocracy is subject to very similar problems as exclusionary epistocracy unless it is also relatively *even*. This means that even those citizens who meet whatever competence standard is in place can only acquire a small number of additional votes. On the other hand, the voting scheme should not become too even either. After all, giving politically competent citizens more decision-making power is the very point of the epistocratic proposal. Its purpose is undermined if competent citizens can merely earn a fraction of an additional vote. For the sake of transparency and ease of exposition, let us therefore stipulate that in an inclusive and even epistocracy, citizens can attain precisely one additional vote if they meet whatever competence standard obtains.

3.3 Moderateness

The epistocratic proposal is commonly regarded as elitist. Insofar as it holds that sound political judgement requires some kind of skill that not all citizens possess, this classification is appropriate. However, as Richard Arneson (2016, 156) points out, elitism as a political doctrine can come in many forms. Associating epistocracy with

elitism might misleadingly suggest that it seeks to empower a tiny fraction of the wisest and most sophisticated citizens, akin to Plato's philosopher kings. As said before, this is not the political arrangement contemporary epistocrats envision. Their concern is not so much that present democratic arrangements give too little power to an elite of policy experts but rather that they give too much power to citizens which the current literature contemptuously refers to as "political know-nothings." A political know-nothing is someone who performs worse than chance at a query of basic political questions. More precisely, "the established threshold for being a know-nothing is correctly responding to less than one third of the items in a political knowledge battery" (Shaker 2012, 532). Depending on the scale we use, this applies to roughly one third of the electorate (cf. Somin 2016, 43f.). The epistocratic proposal is not elitist in the strong sense that it seeks to establish the rule of a few *most sophisticated* citizens but rather in the weaker sense that it seeks to establish the rule of many *moderately informed* citizens. Accordingly, the threshold of competence citizens have to meet to receive an additional vote will not be utterly demanding. They will not be required to be anything like experts in the domains pertinent to public policy. All that is required is that they have a basic understanding of the political system and current affairs.

A moderate epistocracy has two central advantages over a strongly elitist one. First, it is less vulnerable to what might be the most common objection to epistocracy: that it is susceptible to abuses of power by those who it renders more powerful. The smaller the group of citizens who have additional voting power, the more pressing the worry that they share certain interests which they could prioritize over the common good. In a moderate epistocracy, the subset of more powerful citizens will be so extensive that factionalism is unlikely to emerge.[12] The second point is pragmatic: it is arguably much harder to determine the most sophisticated experts in the domain of public policy than to figure out who passes a moderate threshold of basic political competence.[13] While the standards for who counts as an expert are notoriously hard to specify, especially for non-experts (cf. Goldman 2001), it seems much easier to establish who should count as a know-nothing with respect to politics. Epistocrats worry about an abundance of know-nothings rather than a lack of experts in the electorate because they worry that the former are particularly prone to base their

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[12] This is not to say that the members of this subset might not disproportionately share specific features and political attitudes; cf. the discussion in chapters 4 and 5.

[13] In fact, some have argued that in the complex political world we inhabit, there are no individual political experts. On this view, political expertise is a feature that only applies to collective agents (cf. Fuerstein 2008, 78; Ebeling 2017, 213).

voting decisions on irrelevant considerations and irrational impulses. I return to the issue of political ignorance in the next chapter, so I will not go into any detail here, but epistocrats contend that the misconceptions of ignorant voters are not distributed randomly, such that they cancel each other out in the aggregate.[14] Rather, they suffer from some common biases which, epistocrats argue, severely undermine the quality of electoral outcomes (cf. Caplan 2012; Mulligan 2016). Their main intention, therefore, is not to privilege the judgements of a necessarily contentious set of political experts but rather to dilute the impact of the least informed voters.

3.4 Variability and opacity

An inclusive, even, and moderate epistocracy is supposed to allocate more voting power to citizens who are *politically competent*, that is, citizens who can be trusted to make sound judgements about the common good, which representatives or candidates have the skills and influence to implement the required policies, et cetera. But how do we determine who possesses this kind of competence? One approach is to use a proxy, like someone's occupation or level of education, but it is doubtful, to say the least, how accurately these proxies track the competence we are interested in. A better approach, arguably, is to directly assess citizens' levels of basic political knowledge. Now, the exact relation between someone's level of basic political knowledge and their competence to make sound decisions at the ballot is by no means straightforward, another issue I will come back to in chapter 3. For now, let us put these complications aside and ask what kind of political knowledge assessments Epistocratic Democracy should employ.

In an inclusive epistocracy, the point of assessing citizens' political knowledge is not to determine whether they should have a vote but how many votes they should have. This raises the question: how many votes with respect to what voting process? One answer could be that citizens who have once qualified for an additional vote are entitled to it for all upcoming elections and referendums. This would suggest that the examination of voters' knowledge proceeds on a very general level, asking more

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[14] This is what happens according to the "miracle of aggregation." The alleged miracle occurs when only a small portion of an electorate knows what the best option to vote for is, while the majority lacks this knowledge. If the errors made by the ignorant majority distribute randomly, the result of the voting process is exclusively determined by the enlightened minority, whose members all vote for the best option. However, the "miracle" relies on several assumptions unlikely to be met in practice, and I am not aware of any author who employs this model in an epistemic argument for democracy. For critical discussions of the "miracle," cf. Caplan (2009), Landemore (2013, 156-60), Somin (2016, 127), Brennan (2018b, 93f.), and Ahlstrom-Vij (2020b, 407).

or less timeless questions about, for example, the political system, the function of core political institutions, and potentially some history, economics, or political philosophy. Every citizen who passes such an exam would then get an additional vote for every election or referendum she chooses to participate in.

The problem with such a generic assessment of political knowledge is that it is so detached from the issues citizens encounter in everyday politics. It seems plausible to assume that the knowledge citizens need to form sound judgements on questions of public policy will often change in light of current events. This suggests that the examination of political knowledge should be election-specific. It could inquire, for instance, citizens' knowledge about the political profiles of the candidates who are running and the most pressing issues pertinent to the election or referendum at hand. It could be directly attached to and submitted along with the ballot. Polling officers, when doing the vote counting, would check both the ballot and the exam sheet and double the weight of each vote accompanied by a sufficiently high score. All other votes would be counted just once.

Assessing political competence with respect to each individual voting process has two important upshots: first, it means that additional voting power is not acquired once and for all but only temporarily with respect to a given election. After the election, all citizens return to the default number of votes, and the process of allocating additional votes starts anew next time around. Accordingly, the pattern of the distribution of voting power is likely to differ from election to election, at least to some extent. Depending on who has the knowledge pertinent to a specific election, there will be some variation in the subset of citizens who have an additional vote. In that sense, the allocation of voting power is *variable*.

Second, in a voting system employing the secret ballot, there will be no way to trace back which voter got which score on the exam, which is attached to and cast together with the ballot. Therefore, the allocation of additional voting power is fully anonymous. After the vote, it will be possible to determine how many citizens have clinched an additional vote in the election; it will be impossible, however, to say which citizens did. In that sense, the allocation of additional voting power is *opaque*.

Let us take stock so far. I have sketched the basic features of a voting scheme that is inclusive, even, moderate, variable, and opaque. I argue that this specific arrangement, to which I henceforth refer to as Epistocratic Democracy, is a particularly strong version of the epistocratic proposal. I already indicated some respects in which Epistocratic Democracy is superior to alternative forms of epistocracy. But even if that is the case, it obviously does not mean that Epistocratic Democracy is the most plausible epistocratic alternative to democracy as we know it. To make this point, I

will now discuss three generic objections that have been raised against epistocracy and argue that Epistocratic Democracy can avoid or at least mitigate them.

4. Objections

4.1 Landemore's epistemic objection

According to Landemore, we should reject epistocracy for the straightforward reason that it will not yield better political decisions. In fact, an (a) *inclusive electorate* that (b) *gives the same voting power to everyone* will produce better decisions than any feasible form of epistocracy (Landemore 2013, 2014).

(a) Landemore's argument for maximal inclusiveness is based on the claim that the collective competence of a group hinges on two variables: the individual competence levels of the group members and the group's cognitive diversity. Wherever these two variables cannot be maximised simultaneously, priority should be given to the latter. The more perspectives can be brought to bear on an issue, the wider the range of experiences that can be employed, and the more approaches to a problem are available, the better the chance that a group will reach the global optimum when solving a problem.[15] Since cognitive diversity automatically increases with the number of group members, Landemore defends a *Numbers Trump Ability Theorem* (2013, 104): in the long run, a maximally inclusive group will outperform any subset of the group, even if it is constituted of its smartest members. For the sake of epistemic reliability, we should therefore make the group of decision-makers as inclusive as possible.

(b) Landemore's argument for affording the same voting power to all members of the electorate draws on the idea that politics is a domain of radical uncertainty. Neither do citizens know what political problems they will face in the future nor do they "know, ex ante, who among the included will turn out, ex post, to have the kind of knowledge or bring the kind of perspective needed to solve the problem" (2014,

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[15] This idea is akin to Young's (1997) account of the value of including different "social perspectives" in the democratic process. For Young, a social perspective is "a certain way of being sensible to particular aspects of social life, meanings, and interactions, and perhaps less sensitive to others" (1997, 397f.). She fleshes out this notion in explicitly epistemic terms: "Political discussion and debate can sort out the more from the less true, the better from the worse political judgements (...) only by encouraging the expression of all the particular social group perspectives relevant and salient to an issue" (1997, 400).

174). The best thing citizens can do under these circumstances is to treat all potential sources of relevant knowledge equally: introducing differences in voting power at t_1 could disadvantage exactly those citizens whose skills will be particularly helpful for addressing a political problem arising at t_2.[16] From today's perspective, there is no basis on which we could reasonably attach different weights to citizens' votes on future issues:

> "in the same way that an investor should diversify her portfolio following the simple heuristic 'One over N' rather than a mean-variance strategy, a group should diversify the risk of collective decision-making by following the simple heuristic 'democracy' or 'equal right of speech followed by one man, one vote' rather than (...) plural voting schemes" (ibid.).

What do these arguments imply for different forms of epistocracy? First, if the argument from cognitive diversity is on the right track,[17] it makes a strong point against exclusionary or strongly elitist forms of epistocracy. If the franchise is restricted or voting power is allocated very unevenly, some of the cognitive diversity of the citizenry will not be utilised. Epistocratic Democracy, however, enfranchises everyone – or more precisely: as many citizens as Standard Democracy – and thus employs the same diversity of perspectives on and approaches to given political problems. At this point, it is also worth highlighting the relevance of the assumption that Epistocratic Democracy employs a voting age. Following the logic of Landemore's Numbers Trump Ability Theorem, an Epistocratic Democracy that gave a vote to *all* citizens, regardless of age (and an extra vote to those who meet a certain knowledge requirement), would even surpass Standard Democracy in terms of its cognitive diversity. In any case, the argument from cognitive diversity does not vindicate Standard Democracy vis-à-vis Epistocratic Democracy.

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[16] A similar argument is advanced by Müller (2018, 1283): "Since nearly everything in the world can potentially become a social problem, every kind of knowledge can become useful in social problem-solving at some point or another."

[17] Several authors have criticised Landemore for overstating the importance of cognitive diversity for collective competence. In particular, it has been argued that cognitive diversity correlates with value diversity, which makes decision-makers less likely to agree on what counts as a solution to a given problem (cf. Stich 2014; Ancell 2017; Bagg 2018). Others have pointed out that cognitive diversity by itself does not promote collective competence unless decision-makers also possess a modicum of knowledge relevant for the issue at stake (cf. Gunn 2014).

One might object that Epistocratic Democracy does not harness the cognitive diversity of the electorate as efficiently as Standard Democracy does. Although it takes as many points of view *into account*, it does not give the same *weight* to each individual judgement. The argument from radical uncertainty is meant to explain why this is problematic: the judgements of citizens whose votes are discounted today because they do not have relevant knowledge about current political problems might turn out to have exactly the kind of knowledge to address political problems that arise tomorrow.

In response, epistocrats could hold that the political problems facing a society change more rapidly than the kinds of knowledge needed to address these problems. We only have to make sure that not all citizens who receive extra votes have the same or similar kinds of knowledge. For instance, they should not all be economists or lawyers because economic and legal knowledge, although certainly relevant to a wide range of political issues, do not cover the whole range of knowledge that we need when dealing with future political challenges. However, Epistocratic Democracy is not about empowering a narrow set of experts anyway. Rather, it seeks to slightly reallocate voting power among a mass electorate. Therefore, it is more likely to be overinclusive than underinclusive when it comes to affording additional votes. That is, it is more likely to give extra voting power to citizens although they are not specifically knowledgeable about current political issues than it is to discount the votes of citizens although they do possess the knowledge in question. For this reason, the force of the argument from radical uncertainty is mitigated by the fact that Epistocratic Democracy is inclusive and moderate.

Still, Landemore's argument does make the important point that it is epistemically counterproductive to empower a specific set of citizens with a specific kind of knowledge, however generally useful for devising public policy. This consideration counts strongly, perhaps decisively, against static forms of epistocracy in which additional voting power is allocated according to a one-size-fits-all assessment of political knowledge. Even if the assessment is designed such that a diverse range of citizens will acquire an additional vote, the worry remains that the ensuing subset of more influential voters is not suitable for dealing with any issue that the polity might be confronted with. This line of reasoning, however, does not discredit forms of epistocracy in which additional voting power is allocated temporarily according to criteria that are considered pertinent at a specific point of time. Epistocratic Democracy keeps open the full range of possible allocations of extra votes with respect to each future decision.

Of course, this alleged benefit of Epistocratic Democracy hinges on the crucial assumption that it is possible to design a test that accurately identifies the subset of citizens who possess the knowledge we want to privilege. This is a major issue facing everyone who wishes to endorse Epistocratic Democracy. However, the problem of translating an abstract knowledge requirement into a workable test applies to all forms of epistocracy. Therefore, it does not undermine the present point, namely that Epistocratic Democracy is the strongest form of epistocracy. The claim that it is *least* vulnerable to democratic objections does not mean that it is free from objections. However, even if designing an epistemically adequate and publicly accepted test poses an insurmountable problem for epistocrats, this only amounts to a pragmatic objection to Epistocratic Democracy. From a purely epistemic perspective, Epistocratic Democracy seems well-equipped to strike the right balance between the two components of collective competence that Landemore's argument for democracy builds on: for one thing, it accommodates a wide range of diverse social perspectives; moreover, it is variable enough to harness different kinds of knowledge that obtain among the electorate.

4.2 Christiano's moral objection

As noted above, many democratic theorists are sceptical about the prospects of purely epistemic objections to epistocracy. They reject epistocracy primarily for moral reasons. A particularly nuanced version of the moral objection is put forward by Christiano (2001, 2008), according to whom the core value that democratic institutions realise is equality. On his account, both democratic rights, which give each individual a say in collective decision-making processes, and liberal rights, which enable individuals to shape their lives according to their own judgement, are grounded in what he calls "the principle of public equality" (2008, 2). This principle rests on two core ideas: first, all individuals are entitled to the same consideration of their basic interests. A just society must be arranged such that it treats the interests of all citizens as equally important. It ought to be the case that nobody enjoys priority over anyone else in this respect (2008, chapter 1). Second, social justice requires that "justice must not only be done, it must also be seen to be done" (2008, 46). This demand for publicity primarily appeals to political institutions, which must be designed such that citizens can see that each individual's interests are given equal consideration. This is particularly important whenever these interests come into conflict. Political institutions must resolve cases of disagreement in a way that publicly expresses the fundamental equality of each citizen's interests.

Public institutions have to be responsive to the claims of everyone to whom the "facts of diversity, disagreement, fallibility, and cognitive bias" (2008, 84) – in short, the *facts of judgement* – apply.[18] These are facts about society which link the judgements of individuals to their interests. The principle of public equality requires balancing the interests of citizens with very different views. These differences imply that, from the perspective of each individual, it is hard to comprehend the views and interests of others. Therefore, citizens' moral and political judgements will inevitably be partial, reflecting their specific lifestyles, proclivities, aversions, and experiences. Thus the question: "In the light of the facts of judgement, how can we publicly embody equality in the face of disagreements about law and policy?" (2001, 208).

Christiano's key argument for democracy is that democratic institutions are uniquely capable of satisfying the principle of public equality given the facts of judgement. In particular, the equal right to shape the rules of social life is grounded in each citizen's claim to have their equal standing publicly expressed:

> "a society that withholds the vote from some groups of people, or diminishes their political power in some clear way, is publicly expressing a lack of concern for those people. (…) From an egalitarian standpoint, a society that fails to give all of its sane adult members the vote or that significantly diminishes the power of some group is publicly treating some of its members as inferiors" (2008, 90).

This argument against epistocracy does not only apply to exclusionary or strongly elitist forms of epistocracy but to *any* arrangement that introduces differences in voting power between sane adult citizens. The problem with these arrangements, Christiano holds, is that they send a disparaging message to everyone whose vote is discounted. Citizens are bound to interpret a voting scheme that gives less weight to the votes of some people as publicly expressing that their interests are of lesser

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[18] The facts of judgement play a crucial role in Christiano's argument for affording equal democratic rights to all *and only* adults. In fact, Christiano is one of the few democratic theorists who explicitly address the question why their defence of equal voting rights for adults does not imply an argument for enfranchising children (2008, 128ff.), and who thus explicitly defends a form of what I call Standard Democracy. According to Christiano, the facts of judgement do not apply to children and the mentally handicapped because they fail to meet a standard of minimal moral competence. I return to this line of reasoning and challenge it in chapter 6.

importance, resulting in a "disastrous loss of moral status" (2008, 63) for these people.[19] Whatever the benefits of adopting an epistocratic arrangement might be, they cannot outweigh the costs of violating the principle of public equality, which puts "a constraint required by justice on the pursuit of best outcomes" (2001, 215). Therefore, this line of argument rules out these arrangements as morally unacceptable.

Christiano is certainly right to put so much emphasis on the symbolic importance of equal voting rights. His argument constitutes a strong case against forms of epistocracy in which citizens know prior to an election, both of themselves and of others, how much voting power they possess. In an exclusionary epistocracy, for example, the set of eligible voters is determined in advance of each voting process. Citizens know whether they belong to this set, and to an extent, this will also be known by other citizens: although the allocation of votes need not be public, at least some will know who of their fellow citizens may and who may not vote. For example, polling officers need to be aware of who they may grant access to the ballots. This suffices to trigger the objection that some citizens are publicly being treated as inferiors. Many inclusive forms of epistocracy raise similar issues. Most obviously, plural voting schemes that afford additional votes to people with certain occupations (Mill 2008 [1861]) or educational degrees (Harwood 1998) put differences between citizens in plain sight. More sophisticated versions of plural voting also suffer from this problem, especially those that abandon the secrecy of the vote and determine citizens' voting power based on their "track record" of past voting decisions (cf. Mulligan 2018).

Epistocratic Democracy, however, is least vulnerable to Christiano's objection because it makes the allocation of additional votes as secret as the ballot itself. As explained above, one of its central features is opacity, which means that any election-specific exam can only be linked to a particular vote, not to a particular voter. In Epistocratic Democracy, all citizens participate in the voting process on equal footing. Everyone has equal access to the ballots, and at no point prior to their entering the voting booth will there be any visible separation between more and less influential voters. In fact, there *are* no more or less influential voters up to that stage. These differences emerge only after all votes are cast and remain fully anonymous. Because

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[19] A classical expression of this view can again be found in Paine's essay on equal political rights: "this exclusion from the right of voting implies a stigma on the moral character of the persons excluded; and this is what no part of the community has a right to pronounce upon another part" (1995 [1795], 398).

they are anonymous, there are no grounds on which citizens could encounter one another with more or less respect than they do in Standard Democracy. Nobody is publicly treated as inferior. Moreover, since there is no identifiable set of more influential voters prior to an election, campaigners do not have specific targets to whose interests they could cater. To be sure, campaigners will have incentives to make their messages appealing to citizens with a decent background knowledge about the issues of the election, but this is the very point of the epistocratic proposal: it is meant to strengthen the importance of rational arguments in political discourse, and to make campaigning on simplistic solutions and shrill slogans a less promising strategy. Epistocratic Democracy publicly expresses an esteem for politically knowledgeable citizens, but that should not be confused with expressing disregard for everyone else. In particular, the claim that having one's vote discounted amounts to a disastrous loss of moral status is implausible when the allocation of extra votes (a) proceeds on criteria that equally apply to everyone and (b) remains fully anonymous.[20]

Christiano, or anyone else who wishes to advance an anti-epistocratic argument in the same spirit, could insist that Epistocratic Democracy still violates the principle of public equality. Even if no identifiable citizens are publicly treated as inferiors, this voting scheme nevertheless expresses that not all citizens' judgements ought to be given the same consideration in collective decisions. This might suffice to trigger the moral objection to it. But this response has force only if we accept the assumption that citizens' judgements must be given equal consideration under all circumstances, including those in which they are in an important sense "other-regarding." Citizens might not have a duty to vote for what they believe to be most conducive to the common good (cf. Lever 2017), but the choices they make at the ballots do have an impact on the common good. If many citizens make these choices in highly irrational ways, thereby frustrating public and potentially also their own interests – and epistocrats typically claim to have evidence for this (more on which in the next chapter) – the real costs of expressing citizen equality through the voting system might outweigh symbolic benefits. Even if Epistocratic Democracy treats some citizens, although in an abstract sense, publicly as inferiors, this might not amount to a morally reprehensible form of disrespect if doing so is necessary to protect a superior good (cf. Enoch 2017, 15). Of course, one might doubt that epistocratic reforms of the voting system are necessary or sufficient to protect the higher good in question, but

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[20] On this point, I thus side with Arneson (2003, 131), who rejects the claim that "only choice of democracy can express the idea that persons have equal basic moral status."

that is a different issue. The point is that there might be cases in which it is morally justifiable to violate the principle of public equality.

To be clear, I do not deny that the principle of public equality is of vital importance for questions regarding institutional design. I also do not deny that it speaks decisively against several forms of epistocracy that publicly discount the votes of specific citizens. I argue, however, that this principle does not rule out Epistocratic Democracy: by dissociating the distribution of additional votes from identifiable voters, it avoids the charge of treating some citizens publicly as inferiors. And to the extent that it does express different consideration for citizens' judgements, it does so in a way that is morally acceptable if these differences are necessary to protect a higher good. Whether this condition is met is of course an open question. One could certainly argue that it is not met, but this would amount to an objection to Epistocratic Democracy that is different from the specific moral one I have addressed in this section.

4.3 Lippert-Rasmussen's pragmatic objection

A third kind of objection one can raise against epistocratic arrangements invokes the expected practical consequences of adopting them. Even if we were to accept that an epistocratic electorate would tend to make better decisions and that affording more voting power to some citizens is morally acceptable, we might still worry that implementing an epistocratic voting scheme would produce more harm than good. In this vein, Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen (2012, 255) argues that "we can accept that political authority should be based on the concern for the epistemic quality of political decisions accepting the existence of a group of people who form an epistocratic elite, and still consistently deny that epistocratic authority follows." The main disadvantage epistocracy incurs vis-à-vis democracy, he suggests, is that it will alienate citizens from political decisions and increase the risk of non-compliance. This could potentially undermine political stability. Other reasons notwithstanding, this gives us sufficient reason to reject epistocracy.[21]

There is a crucial difference between political *decisions* and *outcomes*. In politics, even the most judicious decision can lead to terrible outcomes if citizens do not adhere to it. Many political problems have the structure of coordination games: a

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[21] I do not interpret Lippert-Rasmussen to be saying that there are no successful moral or epistemic objections to epistocracy. His main target is to show that a specific objection to epistocracy, namely Estlund's (2008) demographic objection (which I discuss in chapter 4), fails, and to offer an alternative.

scenario where all citizens comply with a decision, even a suboptimal one, is preferable to a scenario where an optimal decision has been made but is not unanimously followed. Based on these considerations, Lippert-Rasmussen's strategy is to concede that epistocratic procedures might produce better political decisions, at face value, than democratic procedures. All things considered, however, epistocratic procedures do not yield more desirable outcomes, Lippert-Rasmussen argues, because they violate a motivational constraint:

> "people not involved in making political decisions just cannot, even with all the will-power they can muster, bring themselves to go to the same lengths in implementing them as they could had they played their part in making them" (2012, 256).

In an epistocracy, according to this argument, citizens will be insufficiently motivated to implement and adhere to the (arguably superior) decisions because they do not consider them their own. Epistocracy would thwart the socially valuable coordination of actions by alienating citizens from the decisions that establish this coordination and thus undermine stable political conditions. In contrast, democracies secure social coordination because they give every citizen an equal opportunity to participate in the decision-making processes that shape the law. This advantage counterbalances and outweighs the sub-optimality of democratic decisions. Therefore, "a situation in which epistocrats rule (...) is inferior on the relevant evaluative dimension to a situation in which everyone rules" (Lippert-Rasmussen 2012, 254).[22]

There is a general problem with this argument. For one thing, one might wonder whether Lippert-Rasmussen's objection to epistocracy inadvertently applies to several forms of democracy as well. If the motivational constraint implies that citizens need to be directly involved in the making of the law, it is at least questionable

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[22] Although they do not deal with epistocracy, Oppenheimer and Edwards (2012) make a very similar argument: the key advantage of democracy over alternative political regimes is that it triggers psychological mechanisms that motivate both the people and their representatives to create a social order that works for all. In particular, democracy works despite the fact many citizens lack knowledge of key political issues: "Policies do matter, but they don't matter nearly as much as the simple fact that we are all working together to create them. (...) A democracy doing the 'wrong' thing will ultimately be more successful than any other government doing the 'right' thing" (2012, 225). For citizens to cooperate, political decisions need to be made democratically: "everybody gets a vote, and everybody's vote counts as much as his or her neighbor's vote. When this isn't the case, the result is instability unrest, and chaos" (2012, 140).

whether representative democracy, in which citizens act as legislators only in a very indirect sense, can meet this constraint. But even if we assume, for the sake of argument, that it can, there is a further worry: even in a democracy, citizens participate only in a fraction of the decision-making processes that shape the legislation. In particular, the most fundamental laws are due to decisions that, albeit democratically, have been made by previous generations. Most citizens to whom these laws apply might not even have been born then. Nevertheless, the coordination of citizens' actions works fairly well in long-lived democracies. What seems to motivate citizens to comply, then, are reasons other than their active contribution to political decisions. For instance, they might comply to reap the benefits of social coordination, because they fear punishment, or for some other reason. In any case, these reasons apply to them irrespective of how democratic or epistocratic the voting scheme is.

For the time being, however, let us put this issue aside. Regardless of what motivates citizens to comply, Lippert-Rasmussen is certainly right to focus on whether a political system yields stable outcomes rather than epistemically excellent decisions. This consideration speaks strongly against two forms of epistocracy. First, it counts against epistocracies that allocate voting power prior to the electoral process. Knowing in advance that their vote will have less weight than the vote of others might discourage citizens from participating in the first place. To the extent that high participation rates are necessary to secure the long-term viability of electoral procedures and the perceived legitimacy of their results (cf. Schäfer 2015; I return to this issue in chapter 7), we have reason to reject epistocratic systems that distribute additional voting power ex ante even if the epistocratic decisions, at face value, were better than democratic decisions.

Second, stability considerations also count against forms of epistocracy that employ sophisticated technical devices to produce political decisions. This applies to several versions of epistocracy that have been discussed recently. For instance, Brennan's (2017, 2018a) *government by simulated oracle* is the attempt to extrapolate from actual electoral outcomes what a demographically equivalent electorate would have chosen had citizens been fully informed:

> "Every citizen may vote. When citizens vote, they (a) indicate their policy preferences or their preferred political outcomes, while (b) indicating their demographic information, and (c) taking a test of basic political knowledge. The government then uses data sets (a), (b), and (c) to determine, statistically, what a fully informed electorate would want, while

correcting for the influence of race, income, sex, and/or other demo-
graphic factors on the vote" (Brennan 2018a, 55).[23]

Another example is Thomas Mulligan's (2018) *plural voting under Q*, which uses an
artificial intelligence process which computes the political competence of every voter
based on their track record of previous voting decisions. Contemporary epistocrats
place high hopes in these electoral schemes.[24] However, considerations relating to
political stability make clear what is deeply problematic about them: they are so com-
plicated that citizens will not easily understand how their electoral input is used to
generate a specific output.[25] Especially in times when trust in democratic institutions
is low, citizens are unlikely to accept an electoral result generated by an artificial in-
telligence device as a genuine expression of the "will of the people." It is therefore
questionable, to say the least, whether adopting these proposals would yield better
political outcomes, even if they produce more rational electoral decisions.

Epistocratic Democracy avoids or at least mitigates these problems. First, it does
not discourage citizens from participating in voting procedures because it allocates
additional votes during this process rather than ex ante. Citizens who do not receive
an additional vote for a particular election may nevertheless do so next time around.
One might of course worry that the prospect of being tested will deter some people
from going to the ballots. But there could also be a countervailing effect: potentially,
the prospect of receiving an additional vote will motivate some citizens to participate
who otherwise would have abstained. After all, they cannot lose their vote in Episto-
cratic Democracy – they can only gain something. It is at least not obvious, a priori,
which of these effects will dominate. In any case, Epistocratic Democracy cannot be

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[23] Cf. also Ahlstrom-Vij's case for *modelled democracy* which, similar to Brennan's proposal, involves
"filtering the electoral input of a universal franchise through a statistical model that simulates what
the public's preferences would have been, had they been informed on politically relevant matters"
(2020a, 19).

[24] As mentioned, Brennan does not explicitly endorse any specific form of epistocracy. He does sug-
gest, however, that government by simulated oracle fares particularly well according to some criteria
(2018a, 58f.). Mulligan takes plural voting under Q to be "the most promising of the epistocratic
systems currently on offer" (2018, 303).

[25] Cf. Rosenbluth and Shapiro (2018, 48f.) who note, in a different context, that "there are political
limits to the complexity of voting schemes." In particular, "they can become too complicated for
voters to understand and lack legitimacy with the electorate as a result." Similarly, Saunders (2010a,
350) argues that "citizens must be able to trust the workings of the electoral system if it is to enjoy
their support."

discarded out of hand based on considerations relating to citizen participation and subsequently political stability.

Second, the voting scheme that Epistocratic Democracy adopts is simple and straightforward. It does not make it more difficult for citizens to understand how their collective voting decisions produce a specific electoral outcome. The procedure is transparent and easy to implement. All it requires, on the practical level, is that future ballots come with a back page. It alters existing voting procedures only marginally, thereby reducing the transaction costs of proceeding from one electoral regime to another. To be sure, Epistocratic Democracy makes the vote count more complex and therefore arguably more error-prone: instead of just tallying votes, polling officers would have to examine for each single ballot whether it should be counted twice, based on someone's answers on the election-specific knowledge test. However, this is primarily a matter of time and resources and does not amount to a substantial objection to Epistocratic Democracy. The additional costs are worth incurring if the expected benefits of Epistocratic Democracy are great. The crucial question, then, is whether we have reason to expect this.

5. Outlook

Critiques of epistocracy are prevalent, but the critics tend to underappreciate that epistocracy can come in many forms. In particular, the sharp juxtaposition of "democracy" and "epistocracy," which misleadingly presents them as distinct, incompatible forms of government, has led the critics to focus on forms of epistocracy that are not the best epistocrats can offer.

In this chapter, I outlined the basic features of Epistocratic Democracy. I argued that this voting scheme survives some key objections – epistemic, moral, and pragmatic ones – that have been raised against epistocracy simpliciter, and thus can be regarded as the strongest proposal epistocrats can put forward. Still, the argument of this chapter has been very defensive: claiming that a specific proposal is not vulnerable to a set of objections does not provide much of a positive reason to adopt it. The purpose of the next chapter, therefore, is to consider what positive reasons there might be to replace Standard with Epistocratic Democracy.

Ultimately, I argue that Epistocratic Democracy ought to be rejected. But this argument remains unwarranted unless we give Epistocratic Democracy a fair run for its money. Once we have considered what benefits it might yield, we can ask whether there are alternative routes to these benefits that do not employ epistocratic means.

In fact, I will argue that, if we want to enhance the epistemic reliability of democracy in the long run, adopting Ageless Democracy is the superior strategy. Before I get there, however, let us examine in more detail the potential merits of plural voting.

The Educative Argument for Plural Voting

1. Introduction

More than any other form of government, democracy relies on the political engagement of citizens. A government on which citizens have turned their backs might still be *of* the people, but it cannot be *by* the people and is highly unlikely to be *for* the people. Still, many Western democracies have been going through a long period of political disenchantment. Many countries register low turnout levels at national elections and even lower participation rates at European and local elections. Party membership is in decline too, especially in traditional social democratic and conservative parties. In the UK, for instance, Labour and Tories combined have lost more than two thirds of their members since the 1950s.[1] Civic associations, particularly trade unions, have seen similar decreases in their memberships (cf. Parvin 2018b, 34).

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[1] Remarkably, while party membership is in decline, partisanship is on the rise. Compared to previous decades, people have become more hostile towards those who they perceive to be in the opponent's political camp and avoid social interactions with them (cf. Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019, 99f.; Talisse 2019b, chapter 3). In the US, the percentage of Republicans who said they were opposed to their child marrying a Democrat has gone up from 5 to 49 percent from 1980 to 2010 (Runciman 2018, 147). Looking at how American politics has developed in the ten years since, it would be a happy surprise, to put it mildly, if this figure had fallen.

At the same time, many people know very little about politics. To repeat, around one third of eligible voters perform worse than chance on multiple-choice tests of basic political knowledge (cf. Somin 2016, 43f.). Political ignorance is not a new phenomenon. "That the public is overwhelmingly ignorant when it comes to politics (…) is a discovery that has been replicated unfailingly by political scientists; indeed, it is one of the strongest findings that have been produced by any social science – possibly *the* strongest" (Friedman 1998, 397; original emphasis). As Danny Oppenheimer and Mike Edwards (2012, 10) put it: "There's an old saying that knowledge is power; but in democracies, the people have the power, but are largely missing the knowledge."

These findings draw a bleak picture of the citizenry in contemporary democratic states. The idea that the people should rule does not sound very attractive when the people are disengaged and ignorant. In any case, citizens of real-world democracies do not seem to live up to the high expectations that democratic theory, and especially deliberative and epistemic democracy, have of them. The rational exchange of arguments in the pursuit of a common goal requires citizens, first of all, to participate in this exchange, and also to have enough relevant knowledge to fruitfully engage in it. Given these demanding standards, political theorists should be concerned about what political scientists tell them about the real world.

What institutional reforms are needed to bring actual democracies closer to the deliberative and epistemic ideals? Democratic theorists have offered a wide range of proposals to (partially) address this question over the last years. The epistocratic proposal is one of them. In the previous chapter, I outlined the basic features of Epistocratic Democracy, an electoral scheme that gives an additional vote to citizens who pass an election-specific knowledge test. In this chapter, I assess the prospects of Epistocratic Democracy to solve the problem of political ignorance. Now, the idea of "solving the problem of political ignorance" is ambiguous: on one reading, solving this problem would involve making citizens more knowledgeable. Given the prevalence and persistence of political ignorance, however, one might think that it is a phenomenon that is here to stay and that we have to accept as an inevitable feature of democracy. Thus, on a second reading, solving the problem of political ignorance would involve finding ways to make democracy work *despite* widespread political ignorance.

Contemporary proponents of epistocracy seek to solve the problem of political ignorance in the latter sense. They suggest redistributing voting power such that well-informed citizens hold more and politically ignorant citizens hold less of it. In contrast, this chapter argues that if there is anything good about Epistocratic

Democracy, it is that it might help to solve the problem of political ignorance in the former sense. The potential value of Epistocratic Democracy, I suggest, is that it might help to encourage more citizens to *become* moderately informed about politics. If Epistocratic Democracy has the capacity to foster a politically informed citizenry, it has at least one advantage over Standard Democracy.

In section 2, I argue that democracy is an epistemically demanding form of government: even on very moderate accounts of the role of citizens and the nature of voting, democracy requires citizens to be attentive to politics, which implies obtaining a substantial amount of political knowledge. In section 3, I show that the prevalence of political ignorance casts doubts on whether sufficiently many citizens meet the epistemic demands of democracy. Some authors have denied that political ignorance constitutes a problem for democracy because citizens can rely on information shortcuts, but I argue that the usefulness of information shortcuts hinges itself on citizens possessing at least a modicum of political knowledge. Section 4 asks whether Epistocratic Democracy might be better than Standard Democracy at encouraging citizens to acquire the knowledge they need to fulfil their role within democratic arrangements. Drawing on a distinction by John Stuart Mill, I suggest that Epistocratic Democracy can advance the *educative* function of government, that is, it can raise overall levels of political knowledge. This does not mean that we should adopt Epistocratic Democracy, all things considered. However, even if we reject it (as we should, according to my arguments in subsequent chapters), the problem that Epistocratic Democracy aims to address remains: how can we make sure that sufficiently many citizens meet the epistemic demands of democracy? If we dismiss the epistocratic solution to this problem, we have to find a better one.

2. The Demandingness of Democracy

What is the role of citizens in a democracy? The answer to this question depends on your account of democracy. Some accounts (e.g. Landemore 2017b) put citizens at centre stage and advance a view of democratic citizenship that is particularly demanding: they require citizens to participate extensively both in formal and informal political procedures and to determine the political agenda through deliberation at the ground level. Although not all decisions have to be made by the people directly, all levels of the political system ought to be open and responsive to citizens' input. On this view, citizens are genuine rulers of the polity. The primary task of

institutional design is to create opportunities for citizens to actively engage in politics and impact decision-making processes as much as possible.

Other accounts of democracy attribute a more modest role to citizens. On a picture that Bernard Manin (1997, chapter 6) calls "audience democracy," citizens are not so much rulers but rather supervisors of those who are in charge.[2] These accounts take it as given that most citizens neither can nor want to engage with politics, or only very minimally. On this picture, citizens do not have to actively participate in town-hall meetings, join civic associations or grassroot movements, write letters to their MPs, et cetera. The primary task for institutional design is to find ways for democracy to function while large parts of the citizenry abstain (cf. Parvin 2018b).

In brief, while demanding accounts of democracy make citizens the programme directors of politics, more moderate accounts merely want to give them a switch, so they can change the channel if they don't like what they see. Between these extremes, there is a spectrum of views about how much citizens ought to contribute to a well-functioning democracy. To fulfil the role that these different accounts assign to them, citizens need to meet different standards of political engagement and knowledge. The demanding accounts require citizens to meet very high standards: to fruitfully engage in public deliberation and to exploit the opportunities to impact the political process from the bottom up, citizens need to be both politically active and well-informed. In contrast, the more passive role that audience democracy assigns to them does not require citizens to invest the same amount of time and resources into politics. For most of the time, citizens can follow political debates and events from the side-line while they are primarily concerned with something else.

For present purposes, I am not concerned about which of these accounts is normatively more desirable or empirically more plausible. Rather, the point is that even the moderate accounts of citizens' role in a democracy require them to at least take a minimal interest in and acquire a basic amount of information about politics. Even if citizens are not executors but merely supervisors of political power, they still have a vital contribution to make without which democracy cannot work. To use the limited power they have (especially the vote) effectively, they need to be aware of what executives do, and they need to be able to assess the implications of their decisions. Kevin Elliott (2018) describes the attitude that citizens ought to have towards politics as "attentiveness." Being attentive to politics does not require much active involvement, but it does require citizens to be concerned and broadly informed about

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[2] Note that Manin (1997, 226) explicitly uses the notion of audience democracy descriptively, not as a normative ideal. Cf. Elliott (2018, 77) for a brief history of this concept.

what happens at the political level. To make sound choices at the ballots, "they must first attend to politics and make up their minds about where they stand" (2018, 73).

What does it mean to make "sound" political judgements or electoral choices (for now, I use these expressions interchangeably)? Again, the answer depends on your account of voting, and again the available accounts differ in how demanding they are (cf. Ahlstrom-Vij 2020b, 406f.). On a demanding understanding of what it means to make sound political judgements, citizens need to assess what is most conducive to the common good, and their electoral choices are sound only if they promote or even maximise it through their vote. On a more moderate understanding, citizens merely need to assess their own interests, and their electoral choices are sound if they vote in a way that promotes these interests, whether or not they align with the common good (or whether there is such a thing as the common good in the first place). On this understanding, the primary purpose of elections is simply to "produce governments that give most voters most of what they want most of the time" (Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018, 26).

Again, I am not concerned about which is the most compelling account of the purpose of voting. Rather, the point is that even on a moderate understanding of what it means to make sound electoral choices, citizens need to be attentive to politics. Even if their task is merely to vote such that they promote their own interests, citizens who lack a modicum of information about what happens at the political level can easily miss the mark. To see this point, consider the problem of "executive aggrandisement," which according to several authors is among the biggest dangers for democracy today (cf. Bermeo 2016, 10f.; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, chapter 4; Runciman 2018, 44f.). Executive aggrandisement occurs when elected officials cement their power by a piecemeal subjugation of core political institutions, thereby undermining the capacity of opposition forces, the judiciary, and the media to keep governmental power in check. Recent European examples of this phenomenon are Hungary and Poland, where the respective administrations have systematically used their power to subvert the independence of the judiciary, curtail minority rights, and attack the freedom of expression.[3] Citizens who are attentive to these developments have the capacity to discern abuses of power and to intervene if politicians, lobbyists or bureaucrats damage the functionality of political institutions.

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[3] Cf. "Rule of law in Poland and Hungary has worsened", https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20200109IPR69907/rule-of-law-in-poland-and-hungary-has-worsened [retrieved 19 June 2020].

In contrast, inattentive citizens can easily be taken advantage of. They are vulnerable to the threat of executive aggrandisement because they will not realise when incumbents undermine existing institutions and rebuild them for their own ends. Inattentive citizens thus fail to act as a check on the power of political elites. In fact, they can easily be exploited for the political purposes of these elites because their lack of comprehension makes them manipulable.[4] A.C. Grayling (2017, 161) summarises the point as follows:

> "No form of democracy can protect itself either from degenerating into ochlocracy or being hijacked by a hidden oligarchy (…) unless the enfranchised are being informed and reflective. The first defence against both is a thorough understanding of the institutions and practices of the democratic order and the government it licences. This means understanding the constitution, the political process, the extent and limits of legislative and executive competence, the responsibilities and role of the enfranchised themselves, and the political opportunities of the populace as a whole."

In sum, even on the least demanding account of democracy and voting, citizens need to be attentive to politics and acquire enough knowledge to evaluate the actions and plans of their representatives and other policy makers. The more citizens fail to meet these minimal requirements, the bigger the danger of executive aggrandisement. In the next section, I draw on empirical literature to argue that, in many democratic countries, the prevalence of political ignorance indeed jeopardises the functionality of democratic arrangements.

3. The Problem of Political Ignorance

As noted above, the prevalence of political ignorance has often been declared to be one of the best-documented phenomena of politics. Ever since the empirical social

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[4] The early Habermas (1990 [1961], §22) expressed a concern along these lines: he worried that political campaigners increasingly court uninformed citizens who constitute a readily available reservoir of voters who can be employed to legitimatize pre-determined political causes. Political candidates (or rather the marketing experts who now run their campaigns) would not try to convince this target group through reason and argument but rather by catering to the unpolitical consumer attitude which Habermas took to be particularly prevalent among the uninformed.

sciences started assessing citizens' levels of political knowledge roughly in the 1930s, survey after survey confirms that, by basically any standard, average citizens know extremely little (cf. Bartels 1996; Friedman 1998; Somin 2016). The questions in these surveys rarely go into detail; they examine fairly basic knowledge about current affairs and some key political figures and institutions. Knowing these facts seems "critical to understanding – let alone acting in – the political world" (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 101f.).

Not only are many citizens uninformed; there are also many who are *misinformed* about politics. That is, the information on basis of which citizens form political judgements is often misleading or false. "The problem, then, at least with respect to attitudes about public policy, is not that people simply lack information, but that they firmly hold the wrong information – and use it to form preferences" (Kuklinski et al. 2000, 792).[5] With the advance of so called "post-factual"[6] politics, this problem has come into sharp focus in recent years. Trust in established knowledge-producing institutions, such as universities or traditional media outlets, is decreasing. Many citizens now get their information from increasingly hermetical online echo chambers (cf. Nichols 2017, chapter 5; Nguyen 2020).[7] The ideological homogeneity of these digital habitats provides perfect conditions for false information to spread. Studies have shown that falsehoods spread "significantly farther, faster, and deeper (…) than the truth" on the internet (Vosoughi et al. 2018, 1147). This is the case for all categories of information, but the phenomenon is particularly pronounced in the realm of politics.

In the literature, two concepts are frequently employed to explain the prevalence of political ignorance and misinformation. First, the explanation for why many people know so little about politics is often given in terms of *rational ignorance* (Downs 1957): since the costs of acquiring political knowledge outweigh the benefits, citizens do not acquire it. Each citizen's individual impact on political decisions, including

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[5] Ironically, individuals who hold the least accurate beliefs also tend to express the highest levels of confidence that their beliefs are true (ibid., 798).

[6] For an excellent survey of term, cf. MacMullen (2020).

[7] Nguyen points out an important difference between "echo chambers" and "epistemic bubbles," two concepts that often get confused. An epistemic bubble is "*a social epistemic structure which has inadequate coverage through a process of exclusion by omission*" (2020, 143; original emphasis). Epistemic bubbles are relatively easy to break through by simply exposing an agent to the omitted evidence. In contrast, "an echo chamber is a bounded and enclosed group that magnifies the internal voices and insulates them from rebuttal" (2020, 146). Echo chambers are very hard to dislodge because inside authorities actively discredit outside sources of evidence.

electoral outcomes, is almost negligible. At the same time, being attentive to politics and acquiring even basic political knowledge is a time-consuming endeavour that incurs substantial opportunity costs. For each citizen, investing the same amount of time and energy into alternative projects closer to their own lives will almost certainly yield more direct and palpable benefits. Consequently, many citizens know next to nothing about politics and public policy. As Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels (2016, 9) put it:

> "Human beings are busy with their lives. (...) For most, leisure time is at a premium. Sorting out which presidential candidate has the right foreign policy toward Asia is not a high priority for them. Without shirking more immediate and more important obligations, people cannot engage in much well-informed, thoughtful political deliberation, nor should they."

Second, the explanation for why many people are misinformed about politics is often given in terms of *rational irrationality* (Caplan 2007): since the benefits of holding false beliefs about politics outweigh the costs, citizens who hold false beliefs about politics do not correct them even in light of more accurate information. Empirical evidence suggests that citizens do not acquire political information to *form accurate beliefs*; rather, they acquire it to *get their beliefs confirmed* (cf. Caplan 2012; Somin 2016, 92ff.; Achen and Bartels 2016, chapter 8). For many people, their political beliefs are an important part of their identity because they mark them as members of a certain social group. While your political beliefs will hardly ever have an impact on which policies are implemented, they will have an impact on your self-image and whether you are accepted by the social group to which you take yourself to belong. Thus, while holding false beliefs about politics does not incur any costs on individuals,[8] it does allow them to cherish their social identities and to indulge in the feeling of being loyal to their peer group.

In light of these phenomena, many political theorists worry that political ignorance constitutes a profound problem for democracy. Its prevalence, they say, should significantly lower our confidence that democratic procedures are an adequate approach to making important political decisions (cf. Somin 2016, 224; Ahlstrom-Vij

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[8] As Caplan (2012, 322) remarks: "On subjects like the Civil War, the origin of the human species, or the age of the earth, you can believe whatever you like without risking a penny. The same goes for most beliefs about politics and policy."

2018; Brown 2018). On this view, an attentive and well-informed citizenry is a *public good* (cf. Somin 2016; 76f.; Elliott 2018, 83): its consumption is non-rivalrous (the benefits an attentive citizenry yields for each individual do not decrease if the number of individuals who reap these benefits increases) and non-excludable (it is impossible to bestow the benefits of an attentive citizenry only on those individuals who contribute to it). Although everyone would benefit from it, it is rational for each individual citizen not to contribute to an attentive and well-informed citizenry.

Against this view, several authors (e.g. Talisse 2004; Gaus 2008; Christiano 2015; Lane 2015; Lupia 2016; Cramer and Toff 2017; Chambers 2018) have argued that political ignorance – or more precisely: the *specific kind of ignorance* detected by the respective surveys – is something like a red herring in contemporary political science. According to these authors, critics of political ignorance rely on a simplistic understanding of what citizens need to know to make an informed voting decision. Arthur Lupia (2016), for example, challenges the frequently drawn inference from the empirical observation that many citizens cannot answer a certain set of questions correctly to the much more far-reaching claim that they cannot make sound decisions at the ballots. In particular, he emphasizes that political *knowledge* and *competence* are not the same. To be sure, being competent at a certain task requires some knowledge. However, Lupia charges the critics of political ignorance of underestimating the diversity of knowledge that may enable citizens to make sound political judgements. He argues that the surveys in question are not compiled randomly but suffer from a severe elitist bias. They are typically designed by journalists and political scientists who occupy very specific social positions. While it is very important for them, in their respective occupations, to know, for example, what the three branches of government are and who the opposition leader is (a political scientist who did not know these things would presumably lose the respect of her colleagues and maybe her job), this does by no means show that other citizens with different social roles need to know the same to be competent voters. Lupia thus argues that the relation between political knowledge and competence is not as one-dimensional as is commonly assumed in the literature on political ignorance:

> "democracy would be a farce if nobody knew anything at all about politics or policy. (…) however, it requires a grand leap of logic (…) to go from this possibility to the conclusion that everyone, or even most people, ought to be able to answer a narrow and oddly selected slice of questions about the federal government that a small group of elites has privileged. This is particularly true when no logic or evidence demonstrates that

answering these questions is necessary or sufficient for improved performance for other people's high-value tasks." (2016, 162)

In a similar vein, Christiano (2015, 259) characterises a democratic society as a "fragmented multi-tiered system of deliberation" in which scientific experts, politicians, political commentators, and ordinary citizens participate in different roles. They perform different tasks in a complex social system that operates on a division of epistemic labour. The functionality of this system – that is, democracy's capacity to produce policy outcomes that promote the welfare of citizens, broadly construed – is not undermined if many individuals do not possess factual knowledge about politics. In fact, it allows a great number of individuals to remain uninformed or misinformed about many facts that political scientists, journalists, and philosophers consider basic.

Both Lupia and Christiano, among others (e.g. Oppenheimer and Edwards 2012, chapter 7; Ebeling 2017, 215; Goodin and Spiekermann 2018, chapter 12), strongly emphasize the value of "information shortcuts" for citizens. To make sound electoral choices, citizens do not need to have any detailed knowledge about specific political issues. All they need to know is whose lead they are entitled to follow when it comes to judging these issues. If there are persons or institutions who they are warranted to trust, they can adopt the judgements of these persons or institutions and vote accordingly. In this respect, political parties take a central role. Christiano (2015, 263f.) argues that parties provide platforms ordinary citizens can interact with to acquire valuable information from policy experts. Parties transform broad values into specific policy proposals on specific topics. When citizens are warranted to trust parties to promote policies that align with their own values, they can carry on with their own business while letting their political party take care of the rest. This, Christiano suggests, is how complex societies can function despite the prevalence of political ignorance.

I argue that these responses to the phenomenon of political ignorance are overly optimistic. Lupia and Christiano may be right that the connection between political knowledge and the competence to make sound electoral choices is more complex than the critics of political ignorance tend to suggest. However, while they rightly point out that we should not overestimate the relevance of factual political knowledge, we should also not underestimate it. In particular, the value of information shortcuts crucially depends on citizens' ability to assess which political candidates, parties, or opinion leaders can be trusted to guide them to electoral choices that are roughly in line with their own relatively uninformed policy preferences. If

they lack the basic knowledge to gauge the credibility of an opinion leader's claim, information shortcuts can turn out to be wrong tracks. To illustrate, in summer 2016, a significant number of British citizens took high-ranking politicians of the governing party by their word that leaving the EU would enable the UK to fund the National Health Service with an additional £350 Million per week. To the extent that they took this belief as a basis for forming a political preference to leave the EU, their electoral choice was unsubstantiated. In contrast, citizens with a more nuanced understanding of the costs and benefits of Britain's EU membership saw that this seemingly compelling reason to leave the EU was misleading, to say the least,[9] and that, all things considered, a vote for Leave was presumably more likely to *frustrate* a reasonable preference for repairing a chronically underfunded health care system.

Using information shortcuts works only if one has a general sense of orientation on the political map, and this requires having a modicum of factual knowledge about politics and public policy (cf. Brown 2018, 209; Landa and Pevnick 2020, 10). Knowing the answers to questions about, for instance, the purpose of different political institutions or the names of some key political figures might not bear directly on one's ability to make sound decisions at the ballot; however,

> "knowing the answer to such questions is likely correlated with knowing a great many *other* things that are directly relevant to making wise political choices. (…) someone who knows the names of several foreign leaders, or of obscure legislative procedures, will likely know these things, not as a matter of isolated pieces of trivia, but on account of knowing a great deal about the political world" (Ahlstrom-Vij 2020a, 5; original emphasis).

Political ignorance constitutes a problem for democracy to the extent that it prevents citizens from using information shortcuts in productive ways. Given the empirical findings mentioned above, it is plausible to assume that political ignorance is indeed so widespread that, at least to a degree, it compromises the core purpose of elections "to give most voters most of what they want most of the time" (to repeat Rosenbluth's and Shapiro's expression). The more voters acquire the basic factual information that enables them to use information shortcuts to make informed electoral choices, the more reliably democratic procedures will fulfil this purpose. As we have

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[9] Cf. "£350 million EU claim 'a clear misuse of official statistics,'" https://fullfact.org/europe/350-million-week-boris-johnson-statistics-authority-misuse/ [retrieved 22 June 2020].

seen, however, there are structural reasons why democracies apparently struggle to provide the conditions for citizens to acquire the information they need. Given the incentive structure for each individual, ignorance about politics is rational.

Let us take stock. In the previous section, I argued that democracy requires citizens to acquire some factual knowledge about politics, even if we adopt the least demanding account of citizens' role in a democracy and the nature of voting. In this section, I argued that the prevalence of political ignorance is a problem for democracy insofar as it undermines citizens' ability to make sound political judgements. The question, then, is how the problem of political ignorance can be solved. In the next section, I assess the potential of Epistocratic Democracy to yield a more attentive and better-informed citizenry. Of course, it is questionable whether a reform of the voting scheme would have the biggest effect in this regard.[10] For present purposes, however, I want to put this broader issue aside. The question I want to raise is comparative: all else equal, will Epistocratic Democracy plausibly induce *more* citizens to acquire the relevant political information than Standard Democracy? I argue that this is the case. As I will indicate, however (and as I will argue more comprehensively in upcoming chapters), this does not constitute a conclusive reason to adopt Epistocratic Democracy.

4. The Educative Argument for Plural Voting

4.1 Mill's distinction

The argument I want to develop in this section draws on Mill's (2008 [1861]) classical distinction between two distinct functions of government. For Mill, political institutions should advance the intellectual capacities of the governed; and they should be arranged such that these intellectual capacities are employed most efficiently:

> "We have (…) obtained a foundation for a twofold division of the merit which any set of political institutions can possess. It consists partly of the degree in which they promote the general mental advancement of the

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[10] Some authors who share the view that political ignorance constitutes a problem for democracy take different approaches. For instance, Elliott (2018) argues that the state is entitled to use coercive measures, such as compulsory political education courses, to cultivate an attentive citizenry. Others derive from it a "democratic duty to educate oneself" but do not think that this duty is legally enforceable (cf. Bøyum 2018).

community, including under that phrase the advancement in intellect, in virtue, and in practical activity and efficiency; and partly of the degree of perfection with which they organize the moral, intellectual, and active worth already existing, so as to operate with the greatest effect on public affairs." (2008, 229).

We can call these the *educative* and the *protective* function of government, respectively.[11] The protective function regards the quality of the decisions a government issues, that is, their tendency to advance the common good and to safeguard the interests and values of citizens. The educative function regards the political system's impact on the intellectual and moral development of those subject to it. The evaluation of a given form of government hinges on both the protective and educative dimension. Mill argued that both kinds of consideration support a representative form of government which affords opportunities of political participation to all citizens.[12] If citizens can participate in politics, they can protect their interests from being neglected by a ruling elite or a hostile majority (2008, chapter 7). Moreover, opportunities to participate will encourage them to engage with public affairs, thereby broadening their horizon, enhancing their intellectual capacities, and improving their character (2008, chapter 3).

At the same time, Mill famously argued against the view that all citizens should have *equal* participation rights:

> "Everyone has a right to feel insulted by being made a nobody, and stamped as of no account at all. No one but a fool, and only a fool of a peculiar description, feels offended by the acknowledgement that there are others whose opinion (...) is entitled to a greater amount of consideration than his" (2008, 335).

As already noted, Mill endorsed a plural voting scheme in which certain groups of citizens who he believed to be intellectually superior would receive additional votes.

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[11] Cf. also Baccarini and Ivankovic (2015, 138), Latimer (2018, 69f.), and Cerovac (2020, 131ff.) on these points.

[12] Well, not exactly all. Although commonly portrayed as an advocate of universal enfranchisement, Mill regarded it as "wholly inadmissible that any person should participate in the suffrage, without being able to read, write, and, I will add, perform the common operations of arithmetic" (2008, 303). Especially given the illiteracy rates of 19th-century Britain, this is far from endorsing universal enfranchisement (cf. Grayling 2017, 104).

Plural voting, he suggested, would vindicate both the protective and the educative function of government. On the one hand, giving more votes to the educated would bear directly on electoral outcomes. Since Mill held the educated to be more capable of judging matters of the common good, he believed a plural voting scheme to be better at protecting the interests of all citizens than an egalitarian voting scheme. On the other hand, the institution of plural voting would also express public esteem for knowledge. It conveys that, when public affairs are concerned, everyone's view counts, but the views of those who have carefully thought about the issues at stake "are entitled to a greater amount of consideration" than the views of those who have not.

Not many have followed Mill in his case for plural voting,[13] although we have seen that, in the wake of the growing literature on epistocracy, the plural-voting proposal has had a comeback in recent years (cf. Harwood 1998; Fudge and Quinn 2001; Mulligan 2018; Moyo 2018, 198f.). What is noteworthy, however, is that recent arguments both for epistocracy in general and plural voting in particular almost exclusively focus, in the above terminology, on the protective dimension of government. The arguments suggest that plural voting will deliver, first and foremost, superior electoral outcomes, which will promote the interests of all citizens, including those whose votes will be discounted. In what follows, I will focus on the educative dimension of plural voting instead. I suggest that, if there is anything to be said in favour of adopting a plural voting scheme – more specifically, the version of Epistocratic Democracy I outlined in chapter 2 – it is that it might be better than Standard Democracy at creating the conditions that foster an attentive citizenry. Giving an extra vote to citizens who can demonstrate a certain amount of election-specific knowledge might encourage more citizens to meet the epistemic demands of democracy.

4.2 The potential value of Epistocratic Democracy

In times of increasing polarisation and pervasive disagreement about so many aspects of political life, a rare case of widespread agreement among citizens regards the question of what form of government they want to live under. The vast majority of people both in Europe and the United States regards it as "essential" to live in a

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[13] David Miller (2015, 399) notes that "'plural voting' has found little favor even among [Mill's] most ardent admirers." This is remarkable insofar as Mill's *Considerations on Representative Government* is, arguably, "the most important book on democracy in our tradition" (Waldron 2016, 20).

democracy (cf. Eatwell and Goodwin 2018, 116ff.).[14] Being a citizen of a democratic polity comes along with a bunch of civic rights that are historically unmatched by any other form of government. At the same time, however, it also comes along with several civic duties. As I argued in section 2, even on the least demanding accounts of democracy and voting, citizens still need to acquire a substantial amount of political knowledge to evaluate the performance of office holders and ward off executive aggrandisement. In other words, even if we accept that citizens are primarily the audience of politics, democracy is still an epistemically demanding form of government because it requires citizens to take an interest in and show a certain amount of engagement with complex questions of public concern. The "rule of the people" is viable only if sufficiently many people meet this demand. In Dahl's (1992, 48) words, democracy needs *adequate citizens* who "possess sufficiently strong incentives to gain a modicum knowledge of their own interests and of the political choices most likely to advance them." However, the extent of political ignorance raises doubts whether actual citizens meet this adequacy requirement. Dahl concludes that "advocates of democracy must face the daunting truth that the practices and institutions of modern democratic countries seem to be failing to produce even the 'good-enough' citizens." We therefore "need to discover genuinely feasible ways of raising citizen competence" (ibid.).

There are many possible approaches to achieve this aim. One of them, I suggest, is to redesign the voting scheme. How can a voting scheme, all else equal, promote the emergence of an attentive citizenry? What, if any, contribution can it make such that enough citizens meet the epistemic demands of democracy? To answer these questions, it might be useful to picture democracy as a "give and take" for citizens. They *give* some time and effort to concern themselves with public affairs, and they *get* the right to co-author the laws and policies that shape the communal life. In Standard Democracy, at least with respect to the voting scheme, what citizens get is insensitive to what they give: every citizen above a certain age gets one vote, regardless of whether they have engaged with the issues at stake in a given election, and in what depth. Regarding its capacity to encourage citizens to acquire the knowledge they need to make sound judgements on political questions, this feature of Standard Democracy is suboptimal: if your uninformed vote is as weighty as it were if you are more informed, and if acquiring information imposes substantial opportunity costs on you, you might as well not get informed.

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[14] It should be noted, however, that the percentage of citizens who do so is decreasing, a phenomenon I return to in chapters 5 and 7.

The potential value of Epistocratic Democracy is that the plural voting scheme it employs could motivate more citizens to make informed electoral choices. The benefit of plural voting over egalitarian voting is not so much that it gives more power to the educated but rather that it might increase the chance that more citizens will educate themselves to a sufficient degree to exercise their participatory rights effectively. It might increase the chance that more citizens live up to the epistemic demands of popular government. In the long run, this could indeed mean that elections will more reliably give most people most of what they want most of the time. In terms of Mill's distinction, it might indeed improve the protective dimension of government. But if that is the case, it would do so only in virtue of improving the educative dimension first. On this picture, plural voting is primarily an institutionalised expression of the value of considered judgements, and the knowledge they require.

In contrast, egalitarian voting schemes publicly express indifference about what and how much voters should know. Indifference towards many of the voters' characteristics, for example their religion, wealth, or ethnicity, is rightly praised as a key symbolic benefit of egalitarian voting schemes. Indifference towards their knowledge about the decisions at stake, however, is a symbolic cost: it conveys that acquiring the relevant information to make sound judgements is not necessary or important. This is what Mill meant when he condemned equal voting as

> "wrong in principle, because recognizing a wrong standard, and exercising a bad influence on the voter's mind. It is not useful, but hurtful, that the constitution of the country should declare ignorance to be entitled to as much political power as knowledge. The national institutions should place all things that they are concerned with before the mind of the citizen in the light in which it is for his good that he should regard them; and as it is for his good that he should think that everyone is entitled to some influence, but the better and wiser more than others, it is important that this conviction should be expressed by the state, and embodied in the national institutions. Such things constitute the *spirit* of the institutions of a country" (2008, 340; original emphasis).[15]

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[15] There is an interesting overlap between Mill's argument and a particular line of reasoning in the Confucian tradition of political philosophy. As Bai (2013, 65) notes, "in Confu-China, the government is considered to be responsible for the material and moral well-being of the people." He develops a "Confucian hybrid regime" – effectively a form of epistocracy with plural voting – the purpose of which is to endow citizens, "through civic education, with a sense of respect for excellence and

This suggests that the case for plural voting is not so much about its potential impact on electoral outcomes as it is about its potential impact on the political culture. Giving an additional vote to citizens who have concerned themselves with the issues of a given election publicly expresses veneration for thoughtful judgements. It is thus a crucial feature of Epistocratic Democracy that it does not introduce differences between citizens' voting power for their own sake; the point is not to give the most informed citizens an extra vote and only one vote to everyone else, regardless of the general level of political knowledge. Rather, a successful plural voting scheme would make itself obsolete: if it encourages all voters to acquire a decent amount of information before making their decision, everyone would receive an extra vote, such that plural voting would in effect become egalitarian again. Borrowing a famous metaphor from Ludwig Wittgenstein, we might say that plural voting is the ladder that citizens can throw away after they have climbed up on it. Ultimately, the purpose is not to make citizens compete for a fixed number of extra votes but to enable all citizens to make the most of the voting power they have. The purpose is to enable a citizenry that is capable of taking on the responsibilities of democratic self-rule.

In sum, the educative argument for Epistocratic Democracy is that its plural voting scheme is better suited than Standard Democracy's egalitarian voting scheme to encourage sufficiently many citizens to meet the epistemic demands of democracy. However, there are several ways in which one could challenge this argument. In the next section, I address some of them. My aim is not to defend the educative argument for plural voting against all objections – after all, I do not ultimately endorse plural voting. Rather, the point of discussing these objections is to distinguish clearly between the *end* of plural voting as per the educative argument and the appropriateness of plural voting as a *means* to that end. I suggest that even if we reject plural voting, the educative argument for it is still useful insofar as it urges us to devise better means to achieve the same end.

4.3 Objections

There are two kinds of objections against the educative argument for plural voting: (a) general objections that target the very idea of "educating" sane adult citizens by means of the electoral system; and (b) more specific objections challenging the claim that plural voting is an appropriate means to fulfil these educative purposes. I suggest

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acceptance of the rule of the wise and virtuous so as to willingly abdicate their right to participate when they consider themselves incompetent" (2013, 73).

that the former kind of objection is uncompelling. The latter kind, however, is forceful.

(a) Let us begin with the general objections. First, one could oppose the educative argument for plural voting on the grounds that its central aim – to encourage more citizens to make well-informed electoral choices – is misguided. According to this objection, sane adult citizens need not be "educated," and certainly not by public authorities and institutions. The educative argument suggests that citizens will not make informed choices unless tempted with the lugworm of an extra vote, and this insults the autonomy and sense of responsibility of legally competent persons. Citizens do not need the state to tell them that their electoral choices better be well-informed because they are perfectly capable of figuring that out themselves.

My response to this objection is that it would be nice if it were true, but unfortunately the empirical findings tell a different story. Granted, under ideal circumstances, citizens would need neither a stick nor a carrot to make well-informed choices at the ballots. But as we have seen, many citizens are uninformed or misinformed about politics, to an extent where not even information shortcuts enable them to vote competently. I should stress again that many citizens' failure to acquire the knowledge they need to make sound political judgements is neither irrational nor morally blameworthy – after all, many citizens cannot become politically informed without "shirking more immediate and more important obligations" (to repeat Achen's and Bartel's formulation). Still, the point is that there is reason to believe that the electorate is indeed in need of epistemic enhancement.

At this point, one might raise a second general objection: when we are concerned with the epistemic enhancement of the electorate, the voting scheme is not the institution we should focus on. Other institutional reforms are much more likely to have a positive impact on the level of political knowledge among the electorate. For instance, we could introduce a national holiday dedicated to political deliberation (cf. Ackerman and Fishkin 2002) or require citizens to take compulsory political education courses (cf. Elliott 2018). The design of the voting scheme, in contrast, will not bear on how many citizens are well-informed when they vote.

In response, I concede that other institutional reforms might be as or more important. As said before, a reform of the voting scheme might not have the biggest effect. However, at least to an extent, it is plausible that "voting behaviour is endogenous to electoral systems" (Saunders 2012, 348). I did not claim and do not intend to imply that a reform of the voting scheme is a silver bullet to raise overall levels of political information. Nevertheless, citizens' attentiveness to politics can be influenced by many factors, and as I argued in the previous section, the design of the

voting scheme is among them. As long as the electoral system has, all else equal, any kind of impact, it should be designed such that its impact is as positive as possible. Several other (potentially more consequential) proposals that aim at the epistemic enhancement of the electorate may be considered on independent grounds.

(b) Note that this response defends the general idea of improving the epistemic condition of the electorate by means of changing the voting scheme, not the more specific proposal to implement plural voting. Let us now turn to objections that target plural voting specifically. First, one could oppose giving an extra vote to politically well-informed citizens on the grounds that this would neglect the variety of ways in which people can help to make democracy prosper. Citizens can engage in multiple activities, many of which are private and do not have a political dimension at first glance, that promote the common good (cf. Brennan 2011b, chapter 2). Other than acquiring information on political issues, they can also volunteer in the local fire department, participate in the annual wildlife census, et cetera. According to this objection, it is unfair to single out one specific contribution citizens can make to a well-functioning democracy and reward only that contribution with an additional vote.

This is not a very strong objection. It is true that there are many ways in which citizens can advance the common good. Making a well-informed decision at the ballots is but one of them. But just as there are many ways to advance the common good, so can there be many ways to reward and incentivise these contributions. In the case at hand, we are concerned with the specific contribution citizens make when they vote for policies or representatives. The reward citizens receive for casting a well-informed vote should be tailored to this activity. This is not to say that other contributions to the common good are not equally deserving of being rewarded, only that the rewards should fit the occasion. The educative argument for plural voting does not suggest that citizens have a duty to vote. It only suggests that, if they vote, they should be well-informed about the issues at stake, so an additional vote is an appropriate reward for citizens who vote *and* do so in a well-informed way. Likewise, citizens might not have a duty to recycle, but if they do, they should separate their waste orderly. A discount on their council tax, for instance, could be an appropriate reward for citizens who recycle *and* separate their waste orderly.

A second objection to the plural-voting proposal points out a more serious problem: citizens are not in an equally good position to become politically well-informed. The opportunity costs they incur for acquiring political knowledge might differ significantly from individual to individual. It is not the case that all citizens have to acquire political knowledge in addition to their more immediate private and

professional obligations. For some, but not for others, acquiring political knowledge and meeting their professional obligations will overlap: "In any moderately complex society, some will be paid to acquire relevant political information, whereas others will have to acquire it, if they acquire it at all, in their spare time" (Kolodny 2014, 333). Citizens working in occupations that already come along with disproportionate socioeconomic privileges, such as lawyers, journalists, scientists, consultants, accountants, et cetera, are particularly likely to attain basic political knowledge as a by-product of their professional activities. A plural voting scheme is thus likely to give an advantage to these social groups.

Why could it be problematic that citizens who receive additional votes might disproportionately share certain socioeconomic characteristics? There are two ways to spell this out. According to one line of reasoning, these citizens might not just be particularly well-informed, on average; they might also share other features that countervail their information advantage. For instance, these citizens might come from relatively similar backgrounds with similar blind spots of social experience, and this might prevent them from understanding the specific concerns and perspectives of other social groups. Spelled out in this way, the objection takes the form of Estlund's (2008, 215) "demographic objection," to which I return in chapter 4. Another way to flesh out the concern is to invoke empirical considerations which clearly indicate that those groups who are most likely to receive additional votes on a plural voting scheme *already* occupy nearly all powerful social and political positions, a trend that has been accelerating over the last decades (cf. Bovens and Wille 2017). According to this line of reasoning, giving additional votes to citizens who already are more politically powerful (with or without an additional vote) than citizens from other social groups only adds insult to injury. I discuss this version of the objection at length in chapter 5.

In sum, the objections to the educative argument for plural voting produce a mixed result: pace the general objections, I held that creating a more attentive citizenry is an appropriate goal, and that reforming electoral institutions is an adequate approach to pursuing it. However, this leaves open the question whether adopting a *plural voting scheme* is the most suitable means to this end. As we have seen, there are some doubts whether it is. At this point, all we can say is that proponents of plural voting ask the right question: given that democracy is an epistemically demanding form of government, how can we get more citizens to meet these epistemic demands? Whether they also give the right answer to this question remains to be seen.

5. Outlook

This completes the first part of this work. In the previous chapter, I outlined the features of Epistocratic Democracy and argued that it is more resilient against some common objections to epistocracy than other forms. In this chapter, I argued that democracy (even on the least demanding account of it) is viable only if sufficiently many citizens are at least moderately informed about politics. Political ignorance prevents citizens from evaluating the decisions of representatives and policy makers and thus undermines their capacity to act as a check against the danger of executive aggrandisement. Epistocratic Democracy has an advantage over Standard Democracy insofar as it publicly expresses the importance of well-informed electoral choices. Drawing on Mill's distinction between the protective and the educative function of government, I claimed that the most compelling reason to adopt plural voting, if any, is that it might encourage more citizens to acquire the knowledge they need to fulfil their function within a democratic form of government.

However, even if we accept that the electorate needs some kind of epistemic enhancement, it remains questionable whether plural voting is, all things considered, the solution to this problem. In the next two chapters, I will argue that there are several reasons, both principled and contingent on current political circumstances, that conclusively speak against adopting Epistocratic Democracy. In other words, I am going to provide a preliminary defence of Standard Democracy. In the final two chapters, I will argue that Standard Democracy is itself an untenable view. Given that the epistocratic option has been blocked, this will set the stage for my case for Ageless Democracy.

Democracy and Qualified Acceptability

1. Introduction

When people look back at the political systems of past ages, they rarely do so favourably. From today's perspective, the injustices of, for example, absolutist monarchies or fascist or communist dictatorships are self-evident. As we know, these regimes were vigorously defended, at their times, by many contemporaries, also and especially against democracy. To us, however, it is clear that the proponents of these forms of government were terribly mistaken.

It seems hard to imagine that future people will judge the democracies of our days equally damningly. However, in Tim Mulgan's dystopia *Ethics for a Broken World* (2011), this is exactly what they do. Set in an unspecified future, a time of ecological disaster, the book is written from the perspective of a philosophy professor who lectures her students on the lost and gone "affluent age." This term refers to what we contemporaries call "modernity," and in Mulgan's thought experiment, future people struggle to make sense of it. Above all, they cannot understand their ancestors' enthusiasm for democracy. For them, democracy is a taboo subject, a symbol for "dangerous, future-destroying anarchy" (2011, 198). "Affluent people were tragically unworthy of their democratic responsibilities," the professor tells her students (ibid.). Although based on the laudable ideas of self-government and universal participation, actual democracies were "characterized by very low voter-turnouts [and] widespread ignorance of (and disengagement with) politics" (2011, 203). The future people take their own existential hardships to be the consequence of the short-

sightedness of the democracies of the past. At the end of the lecture, the professor regretfully notes that the ancestors never adopted "the eminently sensible idea that (...) educated citizens should be given extra votes" (2011, 204).

How could we defend our commitment to democracy in an imaginary dialogue with a future interlocutor? How can we justify our opposition to the "eminently sensible idea" of giving educated citizens extra votes, and more specifically to Episto-cratic Democracy which, I argued above, is the most compelling elaboration of this idea? In this chapter, I discuss an influential answer to the question of "why not epis-tocracy?" According to Estlund (2003, 2008), all forms of epistocracy, including those that employ inclusive plural voting schemes,[1] violate a necessary condition for political legitimacy: they are not acceptable to all "qualified points view." Estlund argues that political decisions must be due to procedures against which there are no qualified objections. On his view, democratic procedures, and they alone, meet this *qualified acceptability requirement* (QAR).

Estlund's notion of qualified acceptability has provoked several critical responses from proponents of both democracy (e.g. Anderson 2008; Christiano 2009; Enoch 2009; Copp 2011; Lippert-Rasmussen 2012) and epistocracy (Brennan 2014, 2018a). For present purposes, I focus on a pair of criticisms, raised by Jonathan Quong (2010) and Thomas Mulligan (2015), respectively, which in combination seem to undermine Estlund's argument that only democracy satisfies the QAR.

My aim is twofold. First, I employ Estlund's framework for a conditional defence of Standard Democracy. I develop a revised account of qualified acceptability (which, I argue, accommodates the criticisms raised by Quong and Mulligan) on which every voting scheme bears a "burden of justification," and the more formal inequality it entails, the higher that burden. More specifically, any departure from *one person, one vote* is justified only if all qualified points of view can accept that this departure is necessary to improve the epistemic reliability of the political procedure. I argue that Epistocratic Democracy goes too far vis-à-vis Standard Democracy for this condition to be met and can be rejected on these grounds.

The second – with respect to upcoming chapters more important – task, is to show that the revised account of qualified acceptability complicates questions of le-gitimacy once we go beyond a narrow comparison of Standard and Epistocratic De-mocracy. In particular, it is not obvious whether the revised account offered here warrants the formal inequalities that Standard Democracy entails itself. Rejecting

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[1] Estlund focusses on Mill's plural-voting proposal, which he considers a particularly "formidable" (2003, 55) version of epistocracy.

Epistocratic Democracy because it is not acceptable to all qualified points of view does not show that Standard Democracy *is* so acceptable.

In section 2, I present Estlund's argument against epistocracy and discuss Quong's and Mulligan's objections to it. Section 3 develops the revised account of Estlund's QAR, which accommodates these criticisms and lends itself to a conditional defence of Standard Democracy within an Estlundian framework. In section 4, I broaden the scope and suggest that once we drop some simplifying assumptions, it becomes less clear whether the revised account of qualified acceptability yields a justification of Standard Democracy, all things considered. The question is how many epistocratic elements a democratic form of government may legitimately entail. The argument of this chapter suggests that Epistocratic Democracy indeed entails too many to be justifiable. Whether Standard Democracy entails the right amount is a different issue.

2. Estlund and His Critics

2.1 The qualified acceptability requirement

In the liberal tradition of political philosophy following Rawls, every exercise of political power requires a justification. More specifically, to be justified, exercises of political power must meet the *liberal principle of legitimacy*:

> "Our exercise of political power is fully proper only when it is exercised in accordance with a constitution the essentials of which all citizens as free and equal may reasonably be expected to endorse in the light of principles and ideals acceptable to their common human reason" (Rawls 1993, 137).

Estlund draws on this Rawlsian approach when offering his account of legitimacy. According to Estlund (2008, 98), a political procedure is legitimate if it "can be held, in terms that are acceptable to all qualified points of view, to be epistemically the best (or close to it) among those that are better than random."[2] On this view, the

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[2] Estlund employs the notion of *qualified* rather than *reasonable* points of view to "avoid any controversial associations with the idea of reasonableness itself" (2008, 45). The distinction between qualified and unqualified points of view is a generic one, and Estlund says little about the content of the distinction (see below).

epistemic reliability of a procedure is an important component of the procedure's legitimacy. Generally, the more reliable a procedure is – the more likely it is to produce outcomes that are correct according to a procedure-independent standard – the better.[3] There is, however, an important caveat to this: the epistemic reliability of a procedure must be acceptable to all qualified points of view. If the procedure fails to meet this requirement, we cannot invoke its potential instrumental benefits to justify it. Meeting the QAR is a necessary condition for legitimacy (Estlund 2008, 48).

What does it mean for a point of view to be qualified? Estlund does not answer this question comprehensively. He only provides an abstract defence of the QAR, the strength of which, he argues, is that it is neither overinclusive (it does not entail that *any* objection to a proposed political procedure undercuts its legitimacy) nor underinclusive (it does not entail that *only true* objections to a proposed political procedure undercut its legitimacy).[4]

Estlund aims to establish that democratic procedures are a uniquely legitimate way to make political decisions. To achieve this aim, it is crucial to succeed at two tasks. First, whenever someone raises an objection to making political decisions democratically, it needs to be shown that the respective objection is unqualified. Second, whenever someone proposes an alternative procedure to make political decisions, it needs to be shown that there is at least one qualified objection to this proposal. The epistocratic proposal raises a challenge of the second type.

2.2 The extra authority claim

Estlund holds that the justificatory burden on a given political system depends on the amount of authority it invokes. He defines authority as "the moral power of one agent (...) to morally require or forbid actions by others through commands" (2008,

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[3] Note that there are several ways to interpret *epistemic reliability*. On the one hand, it can be interpreted merely in terms of frequency: the more often a procedure yields the correct result, the more reliable it is. On the other hand, a procedure's epistemic reliability might also depend on the relative importance of the cases for which it produces correct decisions. For example, if procedure A "gets it right" slightly less often than procedure B, but does so more often in cases where a lot is at stake, A might be considered epistemically more reliable than B. My argument does not hinge on this distinction though, so the reader can understand "epistemic reliability" in whatever terms they prefer.

[4] Anderson (2008, 138) complains that Estlund's refusal to specify the idea of a qualified objection invokes the risk that the QAR could be turned against democracy itself: "without such a specification, we might be in the embarrassing position of relying on a principle that may disqualify not just all nondemocratic forms of government, but all institutional specifications of democratic government" (cf. also MacGilvray 2014, 119). As we will see, Mulligan's (2015) critique is an elaboration of precisely this concern.

2). Roughly, the more authority there is in the system, the higher the burden of justification. "When the burden is not discharged, it [the QAR] asserts that the default condition is the absence of authority or legitimate power" (2008, 37).

There is only one political regime from which authority is entirely absent: anarchy. Since nobody exercises any political authority over anybody else, no justification for authority is needed. The QAR does not apply. This is not the case in a democracy. Here, the majority of the voters have authority over the minority. The same holds for epistocracy, except that in this case, citizens' formal political power depends in some way on their level of political knowledge. Therefore, the QAR applies to both democracy and epistocracy. Both bear a burden of justification.

A crucial difference between democracy and epistocracy, according to Estlund, is that epistocracy is subject to a higher burden of justification because it incurs *more* authority than democracy:

> "there is something additional present in (…) epistocratic arrangements. Here, not only is each minority voter in each decision subject to the rule by the majority in that single case. Under unequal suffrage, some people are formally and permanently under the rule of certain others. (…) As such, this additional element is itself subject to an extra burden of justification that universal suffrage does not incur, and if it can't meet it, the default is the absence of that particular ruling relation" (ibid.).

Quong (2010) challenges this *extra authority claim*. He argues that epistocracy is not subject to a higher burden of justification than democracy. According to Quong, the most plausible way to interpret the extra authority claim is that the *total amount* of authority is higher in an epistocracy than in a democracy.[5] On this picture, the total amount of authority present in a political system is a function of the scope of government: the more far-reaching the commands that citizens have to adhere to and the less extensive the decisions that are at their own discretion, the more authority is present. In Quong's words, the total amount of authority hinges on "the *number* or *range* of actions over which citizens are subject to political authority" (2010, 40; original emphasis).[6]

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[5] Quong (2010, 42ff.) also discusses two alternative interpretations. According to one, the extra authority claim concerns the *ruling relationship* between citizens; according to the other, it concerns the *number of people ruled*.

[6] I am not sure whether Quong intends to imply this, but it strikes me that the evaluation of the overall amount of authority present in a political system ought to have a qualitative, not merely a

Quong's crucial point is that the extra authority claim, thus understood, fails. To illustrate, he gives an example of a primitive three-person society in which everyone has perfect freedom to do how they please, except for one thing: they may not cut down the tree by the river. In the first version of the example, the decision that citizens may not cut down the tree is made democratically: two persons (X and Y) are in favour and one (Z) is against. In the second version, the decision is made epistocratically: two (X and Y) are wise and one (Z) is ignorant. If the extra authority claim is correct, the amount of authority present in the two versions of the example must differ. More precisely, "[t]he extra authority claim (…) should tell us that in the epistocratic example there is more authority than in the original democratic example, but it's not at all clear this is true" (2010, 41). Rather, the same amount of authority – the capacity to decide what happens to the tree by the river – is distributed differently in the two versions. In the democratic version, each citizen holds an equal share of the authority; in the epistocratic version, the share of the wise citizens is larger. But the fact that there is a different *distribution* of authority in an epistocracy does not entail that there is an *extra element* of authority. Epistocrats can concede the difference – after all, a different distribution of political power is exactly what they endorse – and consistently deny that epistocracy incurs extra authority.[7]

However, even if the extra authority claim fails, Estlund's argument against epistocracy can still work. Democracy and epistocracy might bear the same burden of justification, but it could still be the case that democracy can discharge this burden while epistocracy cannot. To make this point, Estlund needs to establish that the exercise of authority in an epistocracy is not acceptable to all qualified points of view. To that effect, he raises the demographic objection.

2.3 The demographic objection

Estlund concedes to epistocrats what he calls "*The political value of education*: A well-educated population will, other things being equal, tend to rule more wisely"

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quantitative dimension. Consider two political societies, A and B, where the citizens in A are subject to political authority with regard to more actions than the citizens in B. However, the people in A enjoy all liberties that citizens in liberal states typically enjoy, while the people in B may not decide themselves which profession to take, where to live, and whom to marry. On any plausible account of authority, the amount of authority in B should be larger than that in A. B is, quite literally, an *authoritarian* regime while A is not.

[7] For a different argument arriving at the same conclusion, cf. Eylon (2009). Eylon argues that this result will "tilt the scales in epistocracy's favor" (2009, 54) because the expected quality of political decisions is higher. In the next section, I provide an argument to resist this conclusion.

(2008, 211; original emphasis). Political knowledge is useful, but it is not not distributed evenly across society. Statistically, you are more likely to be politically knowledgeable if you are a white, middle-aged man from a privileged social background (cf. Althaus 2003, 17). A political system that grants additional power to politically knowledgeable citizens is thus likely to incorporate these demographic biases. Some might regard this as problematic. Even if citizens with these characteristics are on average most knowledgeable about politics, we may still think that we ought not to give additional political power to them because these same characteristics might also correlate with some other features that *undermine* these citizens' ability to rule more wisely.[8] In Estlund's words, "the educated portion of the populace may disproportionately have epistemically damaging features that countervail the admitted epistemic benefits of education" (2008, 62). This is the *demographic objection* to epistocracy.

It is crucial that the objection is expressed hypothetically. Estlund does not argue that the educated portion of the populace indeed have any epistemically damaging features. Neither does he argue that a democratic electorate is better equipped than an epistocratic electorate to make collective decisions.[9] He only argues that these epistemically damaging features *may* prevail among politically knowledgeable citizens. This is the case regardless of how epistocrats determine who counts as "knowledgeable." Any reallocation of voting power to any specific group of citizens will be contentious because it is always possible to object against that specific group that it is demographically biased, overrepresenting a certain type of citizens and underrepresenting others. The objection that these citizens disproportionately possess some epistemically damaging features might not be *true*, but Estlund argues that it is nevertheless *qualified*. One qualified objection is enough to establish that epistocracy fails to meet a necessary condition for legitimacy.

Mulligan (2015) argues that the trouble with the demographic objection is that it applies too widely. Indeed, he holds that it is forceful against democracy too. To show this, he spells out a parallel demographic objection to democracy. Like Estlund, he starts with a concession. For the sake of argument, he accepts that "the *wisdom of*

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[8] In principle, the same issues would arise if, empirically, political knowledge would disproportionately reside with any other social group. In the case of white, married, middle-aged men from privileged social backgrounds, another obvious reason for concern is that they have always been disproportionately powerful members of society anyway.

[9] Indeed, he conjectures that "removing the right issues from democratic control and turning them over to the right experts would lead to better political decisions, and more justice and prosperity" (2008, 262).

the crowd" (2015, 466; original emphasis) might give democracy an epistemic edge over epistocracy; due to some features of collective decision-making processes, a large group might be better than a small group at making correct decisions, even if average competence is higher in the small group.[10] Nevertheless, one *might* worry that "the democratic electorate may disproportionately have epistemically damaging features that countervail the admitted benefits of the wisdom of the crowd" (2015, 467). More specifically, Mulligan points to the pervasive empirical research on political ignorance and cognitive biases prevalent in the electorate (486f.). Now, as we have seen (recall the arguments by Lupia (2016) and Christiano (2015) in the previous chapter) and as Mulligan concedes, pervasive political ignorance may not be a problem for democracy's capacity to produce sound political outcomes. Mulligan's point, however, is that one could still make an objection to democratic procedures based on a concern that widespread political ignorance undermines the wisdom of the crowd. Such an objection might not be true, Mulligan argues, but it is nevertheless *qualified*.[11] As such, it is enough to establish that democracy too fails to meet a necessary condition for legitimacy.

Mulligan does not himself endorse this demographic objection to democracy. What counts is that such an objection is possible. Mulligan holds that a similar objection could be mustered against *any* potential political procedure. The upshot, according to him, is that the demographic objection as such is untenable. It violates what Mulligan (2015, 465) calls a "viability constraint," according to which a particular objection to a proposed political regime must not apply to all political regimes one can think of. With respect to the alternatives at hand, the constraint requires that "[i]f an objection O against epistocracy purports to show that epistocracy is unjustifiable (…), then O is sound only if O does not show that democracy is unjustifiable as well" (ibid.). On this account, the demographic objection is unsound.

In sum, the two objections raised by Quong and Mulligan threaten to undermine Estlund's argument against epistocracy. Estlund holds that epistocracy is subject to an additional burden of justification due to the extra authority it invokes, and that it cannot discharge this burden because it faces a qualified objection, the demographic objection. But if Quong is right, then epistocracy does not invoke extra authority and is thus not subject to an additional burden of justification. And if Mulligan is right, then we either have to concede that democracy faces the demographic

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[10] For instance, this might be due to the mechanism described in Condorcet's Jury Theorem or Landemore's (2013) Numbers Trump Ability Theorem, which were discussed earlier.

[11] For a similar point, cf. Copp (2011, 266, fn. 37).

objection too, or we have to drop the demographic objection, in which case we cannot use it against epistocracy either. The first option undermines Estlund's argument *for democracy*; the latter option undermines his argument *against epistocracy*.

3. Qualified Acceptability Revisited

In this section, I want to assess how the previous discussion bears on the evaluation of Standard and Epistocratic Democracy. My aim is to employ a revised Estlundian framework, accommodating the critiques by Quong and Mulligan, to explain why we should not replace the former with the latter.

Proponents of Standard Democracy are not entitled to claim that it incurs less authority than Epistocratic Democracy. This is the upshot of Quong's critique. And while Standard Democrats might reasonably worry that the demographic biases of an epistocratic electorate countervail the potential benefits of political knowledge, epistocrats can raise a similar concern that widespread political ignorance among a democratic electorate countervails the potential benefits of the wisdom of the crowd. This is the upshot of Mulligan's critique. What we need to do, then, is to explain why the epistemic objections that Standard Democrats raise against Epistocratic Democracy are normatively more significant than the epistemic objections that epistocrats raise against Standard Democracy, even if we grant that both objections are "reasonable" or "qualified."

To do that, let us reconstruct what it takes, on Estlund's picture, to legitimately proceed from one political arrangement to another. Suppose we start with some kind of default arrangement, such as a pre-political anarchy or a regime in which citizens employ a randomised procedure to make political decisions, such as coin flips or a lottery. Now suppose that the people living under such an arrangement, having realised its disadvantages, want to implement a new arrangement that more reliably promotes the common good. For simplicity, let us assume that they consider only two options: Standard and Epistocratic Democracy. The question is which of these two options they should settle on.

The first possible transition, form the default arrangement to Standard Democracy, entails that henceforth, the majority of voters will exercise authority over the minority. This additional element of authority is justifiable only if all qualified points of view can accept that Standard Democracy will promote the common good more reliably than the default arrangement does. The second possible transition, from the default arrangement to Epistocratic Democracy, entails that henceforth, political

decisions will be made based on a majority of votes, but knowledgeable citizens will have more votes than less knowledgeable ones. Likewise, this additional element of authority (compared to the default arrangement) is justifiable only if all qualified points of view accept that Epistocratic Democracy will promote the common good more reliably than the default arrangement does.

Let us assume that both Standard and Epistocratic Democracy meet this condition. All qualified points of view can accept that both Standard and Epistocratic Democracy would promote the common good more reliably than the default arrangement. In that case, Standard Democrats should accept that, if the choice was just between the default arrangement and Epistocratic Democracy, we should implement Epistocratic Democracy. Likewise, epistocrats should accept that, if the choice was just between the default arrangement and Standard Democracy, we should implement Standard Democracy. At this point, we have established that both Standard and Epistocratic Democracy share a certain kind of qualified acceptability, which we can call

> *Horizontal qualified acceptability*. It is acceptable to all qualified points of view that the epistemic reliability of a proposed political arrangement (that is, its capacity to yield decisions that promote the common good) justifies the additional authority it imposes.

This account of qualified acceptability corresponds to Estlund's picture. On his view, however, epistocracy lacks horizontal qualified acceptability. If this is correct, it fails to meet the conditions for legitimacy (cf. figure 1).

However, as we have seen, this view has its problems. For both democracy and epistocracy, it is true that the extra authority they invoke when compared to the default arrangement is acceptable to all qualified points of view. Since it is implausible that one of them necessarily imposes more authority than the other (Quong's point), and since there is reasonable disagreement about which of them is epistemically more reliable (Mulligan's point), we need to take into account additional considerations to break the tie. A particularly salient dimension of assessing different political arrangements regards the social relations they establish between citizens. Some arrangements establish hierarchical power structures, while others entrench egalitarian distributions of power. Plausibly, as Quong (2010, 44) suggests, "it should be harder to justify inegalitarian distributions of political power." Based on this consideration, we can then introduce a second dimension of qualified acceptability, which we can call

Figure 1. Estlund's picture
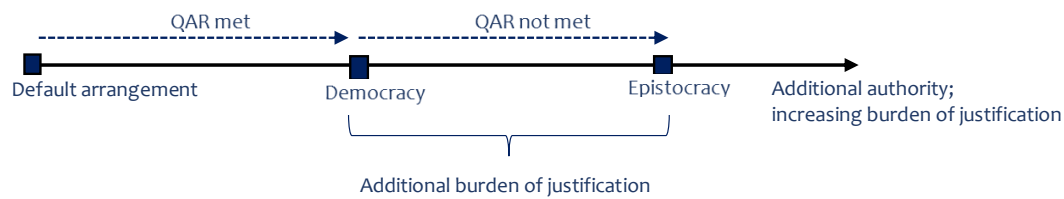
Vertical qualified acceptability. It is acceptable to all qualified points of view that the epistemic reliability of a proposed political arrangement justifies the additional formal inequality it imposes.

This further dimension of qualified acceptability implies that it is not only additional authority that requires a justification when we consider proceeding from one political arrangement to another. Rather, additional formal inequality is likewise in need of a justification all qualified points of view must be able to accept. I understand formal inequality as a measure for the differences that obtain between citizens when it comes to participating in formal political procedures, especially voting procedures. Analogous to Estlund, we can say that every additional element of formal inequality is subject to an additional burden of justification, and if it cannot be discharged, the default is the absence of that particular element of inequality. Epistocratic Democracy grants additional votes to citizens with election-specific knowledge and thus introduces an additional element of formal inequality when compared to Standard Democracy. Therefore, it bears a higher burden of justification. The argument against Epistocratic Democracy I will propose asserts that it cannot discharge this burden (cf. figure 2).

Before I proceed to that argument, however, I have to address a prior issue: why should we increase the justificatory burden for less egalitarian political arrangements in the first place? The introduction of vertical qualified acceptability might look like an ad-hoc move against the epistocrat. Of course, Epistocratic Democracy is less egalitarian than Standard Democracy. The very point of epistocrats is to challenge the presumption for formal political equality, so the additional justificatory burden that the revised account of qualified acceptability puts on epistocrats seems to beg the question against them.

In response, I argue that we can explain the presumption for formal political equality by invoking the liberal understanding of the genealogy of political power. On this understanding, political power is nothing over and above the individual powers that citizens defer to the state when they join political society. The state pools

Figure 2. The revised account of qualified acceptability
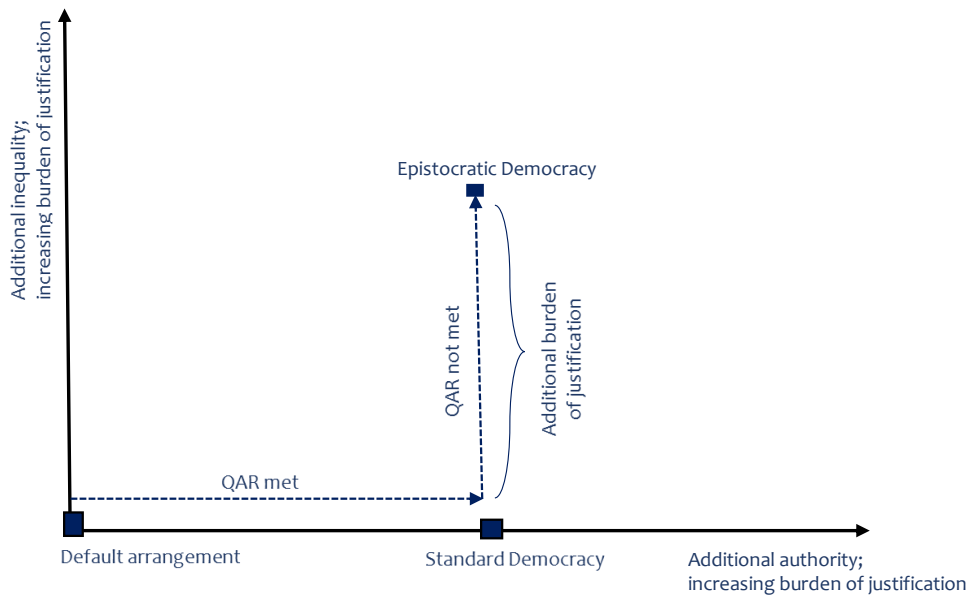
these individual powers and converts them into political power, which it exercises on behalf of the individuals subject to it. A classical version of such a view can be found, for example, in the political theory of John Locke (1988 [1689]). Here, each individual's contribution to the overall amount of political power is equal because they are all "creatures of the same species and status" (II, §4). This basic equality entails that everyone is equally entitled to "order their actions" (ibid.) – all individuals are endowed with the same natural rights the protection of which is the ultimate purpose of political society. Since every individual's "input" to the political power of the state is the same, a political arrangement that redistributes power among citizens on equal terms can plausibly be seen as a default arrangement. Every deviation from the initial pattern of political power is subject to the qualified acceptance of those subject to that power. Since Epistocratic Democracy deviates further from an equal distribution of formal political power than Standard Democracy, it bears an additional burden of justification.

Now, this is not to say that such a justification could not, in principle, succeed. The revised account of qualified acceptability does not *preclude* Epistocratic Democracy. It allows deviations from formal political equality if all qualified points of view can accept that these deviations are conducive to the epistemic reliability of the

political arrangement.[12] The crucial question, therefore, is why Epistocratic Democracy fails to discharge the additional burden of justification it is under.

With the revised account of qualified acceptability in place, we can answer this question. First, the account explains why the fact that there are qualified concerns about both Standard and Epistocratic Democracy does not entail that *neither of them* is justifiable, leaving us with nothing but a default arrangement such as pre-political anarchy. The reason is that both possess horizontal qualified acceptability, which establishes that both are legitimate advancements from the perspective of the default arrangement. Second, we can employ the notion of vertical qualified acceptability to explain why Standard Democracy ought to prevail over Epistocratic Democracy as long as there is reasonable disagreement about which of the two is epistemically superior. Standard Democrats can raise a qualified demographic objection to Epistocratic Democracy, and epistocrats can raise a qualified objection from political ignorance to Standard Democracy. Therefore, neither epistocrats nor Standard Democrats can invoke epistemic arguments to tip the scales for their view. However, epistocrats need an epistemic argument all qualified points of view can accept to justify the additional formal inequality they advocate for. Otherwise, the default arrangement is the one that incurs less formal inequality, that is, Standard Democracy. In brief, Standard Democrats' objection to the epistemic merits of Epistocratic Democracy is normatively more significant than the epistocrat's objection to the epistemic merits of Standard Democracy. The former undermines the legitimacy of Epistocratic Democracy; the latter has no such impact on Standard Democracy.

This argument against Epistocratic Democracy remains committed to Estlund's framework in two respects: first, it makes qualified acceptability the central criterion for political legitimacy. Second, it adopts the idea of a procedure-independent standard of correctness for political decisions and charges epistocrats with not being able to show beyond reasonable doubt that Epistocratic Democracy will deliver better decisions by such a standard. However, in the previous chapter, I argued that Epistocratic Democracy's main advantage is not that it will produce better electoral outcomes anyway. Instead, I suggested that it might be better equipped than Standard Democracy to encourage citizens to meet the epistemic demands implied by popular self-government. Does this shift of focus (in Mill's terms: from the protective to the

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[12] This point is akin to Bai (2013, 81), who proposes a *political difference principle*: "political or electoral inequality can be accepted if the least advantaged (from a material point of view) benefit." In contrast to the position defended here, Bai argues that this principle does justify electoral inequality.

educative function of government) affect the argument against Epistocratic Democracy suggested here?

I do not think that it does. For present purposes, it does not matter whether epistocrats build their case on an outcome-based argument or on the educative argument I proposed. The force of the objection from qualified acceptability applies to both kinds of argument. If epistocrats wanted to justify the additional formal inequality Epistocratic Democracy incurs with expected long-term improvements of overall levels of political knowledge, Standard Democrats can still reply that it is subject to reasonable disagreement whether these improvements will actually obtain. At the end of the last chapter, I sketched a few reasons why one might doubt that they will: even if we agree that a more attentive and better-informed public is a goal worth pursuing, it is not clear that an additional vote for politically knowledgeable citizens is an appropriate means to that end. As long as this can reasonably be questioned, epistocrats fail to discharge the additional justificatory burden the revised account of qualified acceptability puts on them. The default, in that case, is to stick with a political arrangement in which the unjustifiable element of formal inequality is absent.

In sum, the revised account of qualified acceptability yields a conditional defence of Standard Democracy. It establishes that the additional formal inequality Epistocratic Democracy would introduce vis-à-vis Standard Democracy cannot be justified. However, this defence is conditional insofar as it relies on several simplifying assumptions about both Standard and Epistocratic Democracy. In the next section, I will make these assumptions explicit and show that questions about the legitimacy of these political arrangements become much more intricate once we drop them.

4. Complications

The previous argument for Standard Democracy assumed that (a) *Standard and Epistocratic Democracy invoke the same amount of authority*. This assumption implies that both bear the same burden of justification on the horizontal scale of the revised account of qualified acceptability. It also assumed that (b) *Epistocratic Democracy necessarily incurs more formal inequality than Standard Democracy*. This assumption implies that the former bears a higher burden of justification on the vertical scale of qualified acceptability.

This section explores what happens when we drop these assumptions. I argue that this makes the question of which political arrangement meets the conditions for legitimacy much more intricate. Most importantly, I want to show that anyone who

is on board with the anti-epistocratic argument developed in the last section should not be too sure that it vindicates Standard Democracy.

(a) Let us begin by looking closer at the first assumption: Standard and Episto-cratic Democracy invoke the same amount of authority. This need not be the case. The two dimensions of qualified acceptability are conceptually independent. That is, a political arrangement in which citizens are subject to an extensive range of au-thority, thus incurring a high justificatory burden on the horizontal scale, could dis-tribute this authority perfectly evenly, making the justificatory burden on the verti-cal scale very small or non-existent. Likewise, a political arrangement in which citi-zens are subject to only a very limited range of authority (such as a libertarian mini-mal state), thus incurring a small justificatory burden on the horizontal scale, could distribute this authority in very inegalitarian ways, making the justificatory burden on the vertical scale very high.

The assumption that Standard and Epistocratic Democracy invoke the same amount of authority is plausible as long as the epistocratic reform proposal is limited to the voting scheme, leaving everything else as it is. But now consider a twofold re-form proposal that epistocrats might advance: the first proposal is to implement a plural voting scheme of the kind I described in chapter 2; the second proposal is to scale down government, that is, to reduce the range of issues on which the state can exercise authority over its citizens. How should we settle the question of legitimacy in this case? How do we deal with trade-offs between additional authority and addi-tional formal inequality? At least within the framework I have been employing here, it is not clear how to answer these questions (cf. figure 3).

A simple solution would be to stipulate that horizontal qualified acceptability is lexically prior to vertical qualified acceptability. In other words, we would first ask whether it is acceptable to all qualified points of view that the epistemic reliability of a political arrangement justifies the additional authority it imposes when compared to a default arrangement. From among all political arrangements that incur a justifi-able amount of authority, we then choose the one that does so in the most egalitarian way. If the set of options is exhausted by Standard and Epistocratic Democracy (and if assumption (b) is in place, to which I will turn in a moment), we are then able to choose the former over the latter. But this solution is dissatisfactory unless it is sup-ported by an argument for why small increases in formal inequality can never be traded off for large decreases in authority. Otherwise, rejecting these trade-offs from the outset looks like an ad-hoc move against someone who endorsed the twofold re-form proposal sketched above. I do not suggest that no such argument can be mounted – that is an issue I do not explore any further here. For present purposes,

Figure 3. Trade-offs between additional authority and additional inequality
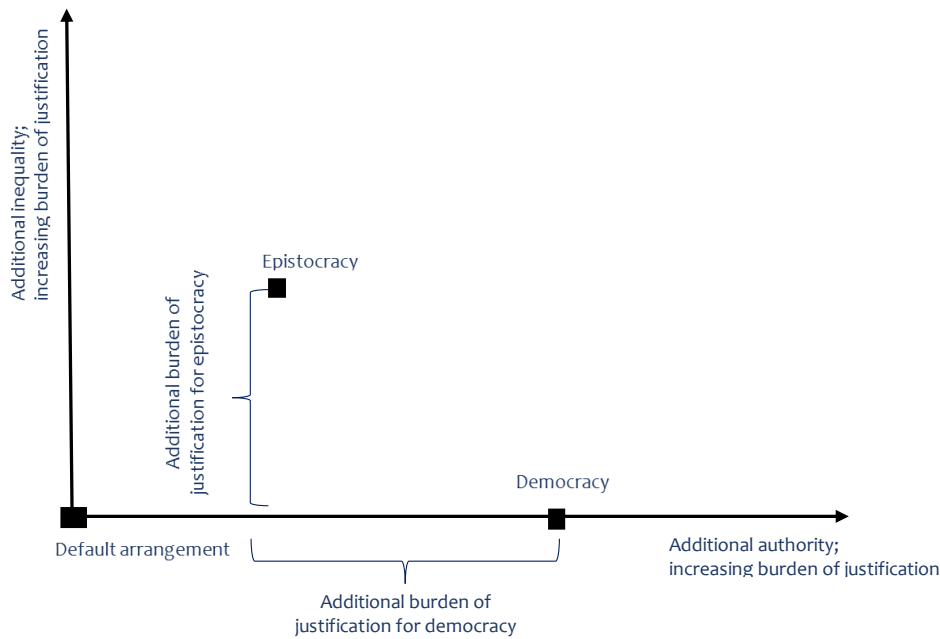
the point is simply that trade-offs between authority and formal inequality are conceivable. This indicates that the question of legitimacy might not be settled once we know that one political arrangement distributes authority more evenly than its alternative. Applied to the case at hand, this means that the revised account of qualified acceptability might not rule out Epistocratic Democracy under all circumstances. Dropping the assumption that Standard and Epistocratic Democracy always incur the same amount of authority (or even that Epistocracy Democracy always incurs *more* authority, as Estlund's original extra authority claim has it) complicates the issue.

(b) Let us now look at the second assumption: Epistocratic Democracy necessarily incurs more formal inequality than Standard Democracy. This is true if we adopt my earlier account of Epistocratic Democracy, which essentially defined it as Standard Democracy *plus* plural voting. On this account, Epistocratic Democracy disenfranchises everyone below a certain age; above that age, it allocates voting power according to political knowledge. Thus defined, Epistocratic Democracy is a strictly less egalitarian voting scheme than Standard Democracy. As pointed out before, however, Epistocratic Democracy need not be Standard Democracy *plus* plural voting. We could easily construct an "ageless" version of Epistocratic Democracy that gives all citizens, regardless of age, at least one vote, and one additional vote to every citizen, again regardless of age, who meets a certain standard of election-specific knowledge.

Ageless Epistocratic Democracy is less egalitarian than Standard Democracy insofar as it makes political knowledge a prerequisite for an additional vote, but it is more

egalitarian than Standard Democracy insofar as it does not flatly exclude citizens below a certain age. Whether we should consider it more or less egalitarian overall is at least not obvious. This point is important. The revised account of qualified acceptability suggests that less egalitarian voting schemes bear a higher burden of justification. The assumption that Epistocratic Democracy incurs more formal inequality than Standard Democracy was crucial for my argument that, in light of the reasonable disagreement about which political arrangement is epistemically more reliable, Epistocratic Democracy cannot discharge its additional justificatory burden. The example of Ageless Epistocratic Democracy, however, demonstrates that this assumption need not hold. At the very least, we need an argument for why the formal inequality established by a voting age is less extensive – or in some other sense less problematic – than the formal inequality established by a plural voting scheme in which *all* citizens can participate. Otherwise, it is not clear whether Standard Democracy prevails.

For the sake of argument, let us suppose that Standard Democracy does invoke less formal inequality than Ageless Epistocratic Democracy. Still, the more general point is that Standard Democracy invokes *some* formal inequality: it does not allocate voting power evenly among all citizens. Instead, it flatly disenfranchises everyone below a certain age. The higher that age, the more citizens are excluded from voting and the more formal inequality is present in the system. This suggests that a form of Standard Democracy that disenfranchises everyone below the age of 18 bears a higher justificatory burden than one that disenfranchises everyone below the age of 16, say, which in turn bears a higher justificatory burden than a voting scheme in which nobody is disqualified in virtue of their age.[13] The only voting scheme that does not incur any formal inequality – and thus does not bear a justificatory burden on the vertical scale of qualified acceptability – is one that strictly applies the principle of *one person, one vote*. According to the account developed in this chapter, this means that *one person, one vote* has to be seen as a default arrangement. Any deviation from it incurs a burden of justification that needs to be discharged – otherwise the deviation is not legitimate.

Although the electoral exclusion of people below a certain age is, as noted earlier, a deeply entrenched feature of democracy, it bears mentioning that it is indeed a significant departure from *one person, one vote*. If the revised Estlundian argument of

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[13] The same reasoning applies to citizens with a mental handicap: the lower the burdens for losing the right to vote due to a mental impairment, the higher the burden of justification for the voting scheme in question.

this chapter is correct, this departure needs to be justified in a way that is acceptable to all qualified points of view. In general terms, for every element of formal inequality, it must be the case that all qualified points of view can accept that it makes the political arrangement epistemically more reliable. The question is for how many, and which, elements of formal inequality this condition is met. I argued that Epistocratic Democracy indeed incurs *too much* formal inequality to meet this condition. However, even if this is correct, it does not imply that Standard Democracy strikes exactly the right amount of formal inequality. At this point, it is an open question whether it does, and if so, for what specifications of the voting age. What we need to ask, then, is whether all qualified points of view can accept that the electoral exclusion of citizens below a certain age (which need not be 18) enhances democracy's epistemic reliability. I will address this question in chapter 6. The revised account of qualified acceptability warrants a vindication of Standard Democracy (and not just a rejection of Epistocratic Democracy) only if this question can be answered in the affirmative. Later, I will deny that this is the case.

5. Outlook

At the beginning of this chapter, I raised the question of how a contemporary proponent of democracy could hold her ground in a hypothetical dialogue with a future critic of democracy, such as the philosophy professor in Mulgan's *Ethics for a Broken World*. Societies that make important political decisions democratically might thereby inflict serious harm both on themselves – recall the recent Brazilian example in the previous chapter – and other people of both present and future generations. In light of this problem, how can we resist the (contemporary or future) critic of democracy who urges us to adopt the "eminently sensible idea" to allocate more voting power to politically informed citizens?

 This chapter gave a first answer to this question: we ought not to incur the formal inequalities of Epistocratic Democracy because it is not acceptable to all qualified points of view that these inequalities improve the epistemic reliability of electoral procedures. The argument for Epistocratic Democracy could be spelled out in terms of the protective function of government, invoking for instance better electoral outcomes, the prevention of ecological disaster, et cetera; or in terms of the educative function of government, invoking for instance the indispensability of an informed citizenry. In either case, there is reasonable disagreement whether the alleged benefits of Epistocratic Democracy justify a further departure from an egalitarian

distribution of political power. Compared to Standard Democracy, the epistocratic proposal advances additional formal inequality, and not all qualified points of view will accept that this is a price worth paying. Therefore, Epistocratic Democracy fails to meet a necessary condition for legitimacy.

Ultimately, this amounts to a *moral* argument against implementing Epistocratic Democracy. Presumably, some proponents of Epistocratic Democracy who are convinced that it would yield whatever benefit they claim for it – reasonable disagreement about that or not – will find this argument dissatisfactory. They might find it deeply frustrating to forego the alleged benefits of Epistocratic Democracy (or, depending on how bad their image of democracy is, to accept the disadvantages of democracy) just for the sake of complying with some abstract principle of political legitimacy, which is not even undisputed itself (cf. for example Enoch 2015). Likewise, opponents of Epistocratic Democracy might be dissatisfied with the argument presented in this chapter insofar as it leaves open the possibility that, *in actual fact*, Epistocratic Democracy would indeed yield many benefits. The argument made thus far annuls the case for epistocracy more than it refutes it. Opponents of Epistocratic Democracy might think that it still gets too much credit on this account.

To convince critics of either kind, we need to give a different type of answer to the initial question of "why not Epistocratic Democracy?" We need an answer that shows in a more concrete way that adopting Epistocratic Democracy is not an "eminently sensible idea" to begin with but would rather cause more harm than good. Such an answer will understand Epistocratic Democracy as a specific reform proposal in response to a specific political problem, and it will argue that the proposal is ill-suited to address this problem.

In the next chapter, I complement my case against Epistocratic Democracy with an argument of this second type. I aim to show that Epistocratic Democracy would not solve but much rather exacerbate one of the most pressing problems facing liberal democracy today: the erosion of trust in democratic procedures and institutions to implement policies that correspond to the will of the majority. More specifically, I will discuss what is now widely regarded as "the populist threat" to liberal democracy and analyse the probable impact of implementing Epistocratic Democracy in light of this threat.

Epistocracy and the Rise of Populism

1. Introduction

Liberal democracy is in retreat. 2019 was the fourteenth year in a row in which countries with net declines in democratic freedoms outnumbered those with gains.[1] There is a growing sense that this trend is not merely a temporary setback in the ongoing triumph march that Francis Fukuyama (1989) famously predicted for liberal democracy at the end of the Cold War. Instead, many democratic theorists think that liberal democracy has reached a point of existential crisis. Just a few years ago, hardly anyone would seriously have pondered over the possibility of consolidated democracies collapsing into some form of authoritarianism. A brief survey of some recent publications gives a striking image of how the tides have turned: *How Democracies Die* (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018), *How Democracy Ends* (Runciman 2018), "How Democracies Perish" (Holmes 2018), "How to Lose a Constitutional Democracy" (Huq and Ginsburg 2018), *Democracy and Its Crisis* (Grayling 2017), *Crises of Democracy* (Przeworski 2019), *Twilight of Democracy* (Applebaum 2020), *The People vs. Democracy* (Mounk 2018) – the list goes on.[2]

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[1] Cf. the annual Freedom House Report "Freedom in the World 2020": https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/FIW_2020_REPORT_BOOKLET_Final.pdf [retrieved 10 July 2020].

[2] The number of books, scholarly articles, and op-eds on this issue is growing so quickly that some authors have already proclaimed the launch of a new "'crisis of liberal democracy'-genre" (Müller 2018; Purdy 2018).

Of course, there is no such thing as *the* crisis of liberal democracy. Large-scale phenomena manifest themselves in myriad different ways in different places, and no diagnosis will be universally valid. There are, however, some common trends that can be observed across multiple countries, especially in the established democracies of Europe and North America. One such trend is a growing dissatisfaction with existing democratic institutions. Many people do not or do no longer believe that the democratic systems they live in can deliver policies that serve the interests of the majority. In particular, trust in institutions like parliaments and political parties has eroded. At the same time, more and more citizens express approval of authoritarian forms of government. In 1995, one in sixteen Americans agreed that army rule would be a "good" or "very good" way to run the country; in 2017, the number had gone up to one in six. Similar patterns can be seen in several European countries (cf. Foa and Mounk 2016, 11f.).

A related trend that is frequently associated with the crisis of liberal democracy is the rise of so-called populist movements. The recent electoral successes of populists in numerous countries have attracted the attention of numerous political scientists and commentators. According to a widespread view (cf. for instance Müller 2016; Pappas 2016; Rummens 2017; Eatwell and Goodwin 2018; Galston 2018), populism constitutes a serious threat to liberal democracy. Populists who rise to power are dangerous, on this view, because they quickly dismantle some vital features of liberal democracy, such as the separation of powers, minority rights, and the freedom of press.

How should liberal democrats respond to these alarming trends? Many democratic theorists think that the current crisis calls for profound institutional reforms: if we want liberal democracy to last, we need to change it. Some of these reform proposals specifically focus on elections. Several authors are deeply critical of the electoral methods contemporary liberal democracies employ to choose political representatives. They argue that the current crisis is at least in part due to the dysfunctionality of elections as we know them. In response, some suggest that "we need to pay more attention to potential alternatives to majority rule" (Saunders 2010a, 169). One proposal is to supplement elections with an element of random sortition, where part of the legislature is chosen by lot (cf. Landemore 2017b; Abizadeh 2019; Gastil and Wright 2019). Others go further and want to abolish elections entirely (cf. Guerrero 2014; van Reybrouck 2016; Bouricius 2019).

Proponents of epistocracy agree that liberal democracy needs electoral innovations. Their approach, however, is entirely different. Epistocrats want to stick with elections, but as we have seen, they want to curb the electoral impact of "low-

information voters" (Brennan 2017, 114). It bears mentioning that they do not advertise epistocracy as a panacea against the many ills afflicting liberal democracies today. They do suggest, however, that the case for epistocracy is particularly strong at present. In particular, Jason Brennan has repeatedly appealed to current political events, such as Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, when making his case for epistocracy (cf. Brennan 2016a, 2016b).

The aim of this chapter is to assess the epistocratic reform proposal in light of the present crisis of liberal democracy. I argue that it is particularly ill-suited to mitigate this crisis; if anything, it is more likely to exacerbate it. Accordingly, in contrast to the principled argument against epistocracy developed in the previous chapter, this chapter takes a more empirically informed approach. I suggest that implementing Epistocratic Democracy is a highly counterproductive way to vindicate liberal democracy in an age of increasing citizen disenchantment and growing support for populist movements.

In section 2, I address some of the pathologies of contemporary liberal democracies. I briefly discuss some empirical literature to show that many citizens across the West have lost trust in democratic institutions and procedures (2.1) and then explore some of the reasons for this erosion of trust (2.2). Section 3 focusses on some ramifications of these developments, especially the rise of populism. Drawing on the now dominant "ideational approach" (Mudde 2004, 2017; Müller 2016), it first describes what populism is (3.1) and then moves on to explain why it is so harmful for liberal democracy (3.2). In particular, I describe populism as a driving force behind a deepening "epistemic polarization" (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019), which challenges the very possibility of democratic deliberation. Section 4 advances the main argument of this chapter: it explains why, especially in an age of populism, Epistocratic Democracy is likely to undermine the perceived legitimacy of electoral outcomes, to exacerbate epistemic polarisation, and to further increase the demand for political movements and politicians who promise to restore the power of "the people" by abolishing core institutions of the liberal state, such as independent courts, central banks, and expert committees. Overall, this adds a pragmatic argument to the case against Epistocratic Democracy.

2. Democratic Deconsolidation

2.1 Signs of growing discontent

Across Western countries, most citizens still endorse the *idea* of democracy. That is, they agree that, in theory, there is no better political arrangement. However, more and more citizens are dissatisfied with the way democracy works *in practice*. There is a growing sense that existing political institutions fail to realise the ideal of "the rule of the people." As a consequence, many citizens no longer endorse these institutions. The erosion of citizen support for the institutions and procedures liberal democracies are built on is a crucial dimension of what is now frequently referred to as "democratic deconsolidation" (Foa and Mounk 2016), "backsliding" (Bermeo 2016), "dealignment" (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018), or "disenchantment" (Tillyris 2018). Before we can get a sense of what it means for a liberal democracy to deconsolidate, we need to take two preliminary steps and ask, first, what characterises a *liberal* democracy, and second, when a liberal democracy can be considered *consolidated*.

Although I will not discuss the first question in much depth here, a common way to understand the basic design of liberal democracy is the so-called "two-pillar model" (cf. Kaltwasser 2012). On this view, the *democratic pillar* consists of the popular will: important political decisions ought to be made by the principle of majority rule.[3] The *liberal pillar* consists of constitutionally entrenched rights and liberties, which put constraints on the popular will: regardless of current majorities, citizens cannot be denied, for example, the freedom of expression or religion.[4]

The two pillars are distinct and potentially at odds with one another (cf. Skorupski 2013). Problematically, conflicts between the popular will and individual rights can be hard to reconcile. Take, for instance, the controversial *Citizens United* case from 2010, where the US Supreme Court ruled, with reference to the First

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[3] Strictly speaking, the concept of democracy is distinct and independent from the concept of majority rule (cf. Saunders 2010a), but I will bypass this issue for present purposes.

[4] Note that the two-pillar model is not uncontested. Rummens (2017, 557), for example, rejects it and argues that "liberal rights should be seen not as constraints limiting the sovereign power of the people, but rather as the conditions of possibility of democratic rule in the first place." He thus suggests understanding constitutionalism and the popular will as two interrelated dimensions rather than separate pillars of liberal democracy. I am sympathetic to this view (for an elaborate attempt to trace back the origins of both democratic and liberal rights to the same philosophical foundation, namely the principle of equality, cf. Christiano 2008, chapters 2-3; in a similar vein, cf. Kis 2019). For present purposes, I nevertheless stick to the two-pillar model because it is more established in the literature. The argument I ultimately want to develop does not hinge on the two-pillar model.

Amendment, that restricting independent expenditures by corporations on political campaigns is unconstitutional. Here, the court ruled that the freedom to fund political campaigns at will is covered by the freedom of speech. Many jurisprudents and politicians criticised this decision. They pointed out that the unrestricted flow of corporate money in politics can severely bias democratic decision-making processes and impede the formation of the popular will.[5] This example illustrates that, even in well-established democracies, the process of adjusting the two pillars is never complete.

Ongoing controversies about the right balance between the liberal and the democratic pillar notwithstanding, liberal democracies are centred on the idea that a political arrangement is legitimate only if it respects both the popular will and the rights of the individual. Given that there is wide-ranging consensus on this point, democracy has become, in the phrase of Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan (1996, 5), "the only game in town." Essentially, this means that "even in the face of severe political and economic crisis, the overwhelming majority of the people believe that any further political change must emerge from within the parameters of democratic formulas" (ibid.). In a consolidated democracy, citizens may and often will challenge specific political decisions, but they rarely if ever challenge the way these decisions are made. Radical political forces that reject fundamental aspects of the political system can hardly gain a foothold in this situation. Roberto Foa and Yascha Mounk (2016, 15) summarise the point as follows:

> "the degree to which a democracy is consolidated depends on three key characteristics: the degree of popular support for democracy as a system of government; the degree to which antisystem parties and movements are weak or nonexistent; and the degree to which the democratic rules are accepted."

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[5] Former president Barack Obama joined the critics and explicitly appealed to the significance of "the American people" when explaining his opposition to the Supreme Court's decision: "Millions of Americans are struggling to get by, and their voices shouldn't be drowned out by millions of dollars in secret, special interest advertising. The American people's voices should be heard." Cf. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2010/07/26/president-obama-citizens-united-imagine-power-will-give-special-interests-over-polit [retrieved 15 June 2019]. On the harmful impact of *Citizens United* on American democracy, cf. Shapiro (2016, 94ff.).

Liberal democracy starts *de*consolidating when a significant number of citizens withdraw their support for democratic institutions. Over the last few years, this is exactly what has been happening in several countries in which democracy used to be "the only game in town." The percentage of citizens who regard it as "essential" to live in a democracy has been decreasing continually for many years (Foa and Mounk 2016, 7f.).[6] At the same time, more citizens agree that it would be a good thing to have "a strong leader who does not have to bother with elections" (cf. Foa and Mounk 2017, 7). But even among citizens who are still committed to democracy as an ideal, there is a growing dissatisfaction with the way it works in practice. In particular, many seem to think that real-world democracies empower the people in name only: they do not believe that their participation matters and think that democratic politics is not responsive to their preferences either way. In short, many citizens have a sense of lack of *political efficacy*, that is, a feeling that "individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process [and] that it is worth while to perform one's civic duties" (Campbell et al. 1954, 187). The more widespread this experienced lack of political efficacy is, the less likely citizens are to support democracy and the more open to alternative forms of government they become (cf. Balch 1974).

What are the reasons why democratic deconsolidation seems to have accelerated in recent years? Obviously, this is an intricate question that the brief remarks that I am going to make will not do justice to.[7] In the next section, I will confine myself to addressing two broad developments: first, the rise of supranational institutions and the loss of democratic accountability at the national level; and second, the political dominance of a relatively homogenous group of highly educated citizens.

2.2 The rise of undemocratic liberalism

Contemporary Western democracies exhibit, in terms of the two-pillar model, a growing imbalance between the liberal and the democratic pillar: over the course of several decades, the former has been expanded while the latter has been shrunk. As a consequence, the politics of these countries has been marked by an increasingly "undemocratic liberalism" (Mounk 2018), which has alienated whole segments of their populations and fuelled a sense that liberal democracies fail to address the concerns

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[6] It bears mentioning that this phenomenon is particularly pronounced among younger cohorts, a point I will return to in chapter 7.

[7] For succinct summaries of the some of the major trends, cf. for example Papadopoulos (2002), Kaltwasser (2012), Bovens and Wille (2017), Rummens (2017), Mounk (2018), Eatwell and Goodwin (2018), and Parvin (2018b).

of all citizens.[8] In this section, I want to provide a rough sketch of both the erosion of the democratic pillar and the expansion of the liberal pillar.

It has often been pointed out that the intellectual foundations of Western liberal democracies are deeply elitist (cf. Manin 1997, chapter 4; Papadopoulos 2002, 48; Landemore 2017b, 4; Grayling 2018, 81; Eatwell and Goodwin 2018, 85; Wassermann 2018, 234ff.). As Aziz Huq (2020, 7; original emphasis) remarks, "the history of democratic institutional design (…) has been a history of partial blockages and countermeasures intended to stymie *sub silencio* the inevitable redistributive effects of an enlarged franchise." Liberal democracy has always been based on the idea that civil liberties must be protected not least against the people themselves, whose irrationality, ignorance, emotionality, et cetera, must be contained in a complex system of checks and balances. The founding fathers of the US constitution famously did not consider the political order they were envisioning as "democratic" but as "republican," making a significant degree of non-proportionality in the political system and non-responsiveness to current majorities core components of the constitution. In Europe, the post-war political order has explicitly been designed to curb future authoritarian threats and is thus also built on a substantial amount of distrust in popular sovereignty (Müller 2016, 96). In short, Western liberal democracies have an elitist bias in virtue of their very institutional setup.

Over the past decades, this disposition has become more salient. There has been a clear tendency to decrease the power of elected institutions (both on the local and the national level) and to increase the power of unelected institutions, including "independent central banks, independent risk management bodies, independent economics and ethics regulators, regimes of inspection and audit and new types of appeal bodies" (Vibert 2007, 5). Abstracting away from regional peculiarities, a key explanation for this is the ongoing internationalization of politics. Many decisions that are most consequential for the economic prospects and demographic composition of a society, and thus for the concrete life prospects of individual citizens, are no longer taken at the national level. They have gradually shifted to institutions that operate internationally and stand in no direct relation of democratic accountability to the citizens of one particular country. A paradigm example is the European Union,

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[8] Mor (2019, 68f.) rightly points out that the notion of "undemocratic liberalism" is very coarse-grained. It does not fit neatly to all the complex phenomena that Mounk subsumes under it. I nevertheless employ the term here because it sums up, despite its imperfections, the general development I describe in this section.

where crucial political competencies now reside with institutions that do not hold these competencies in virtue of electoral majorities.[9]

Several years ago, Dahl (1994) described this process of internationalization as the "third great transformation" in the history of democracy.[10] He pointed out that the shift of power that comes along with it raises a "fundamental democratic dilemma" (1994, 23): at first glance, democratic nations face a choice between participating in the process of international integration or turning their backs against it. On closer inspection, however, the latter option is tantamount to being marginalised internationally, and to become helpless at the hands of political agents whose decisions are then completely beyond national control. At the same time, joining supranational institutions does not restore the political power of citizens at the national level: the bigger the political unit, the smaller the impact of its individual constituents. This holds for the member states of the respective institutions and a fortiori for individual citizens. In Dahl's (1994, 28) phrase:

> "In very small political systems a citizen may be able to participate extensively in decisions that do not matter much but cannot participate much in decisions that matter a great deal; whereas very large systems may be able to cope with problems that matter more to a citizen, the opportunities for citizens to participate in and greatly influence decisions are vastly reduced."[11]

Dahl noted that the battles about how to resolve this dilemma already belong to the past, and the last two decades have confirmed his judgement: "the opponents of drastic increases in the size of a democratic unit have little to fall back on except sentiments, attachments, loyalties. Over the long span of history, they have won some rear-guarded skirmishes and lost the deciding battles" (1994, 35). As a result, democratically elected representatives in local or national parliaments have become less powerful: international treatises and organizations have become more widespread

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[9] On the well-known "democratic deficit" of key EU institutions, cf. for example Krastev (2012), Taggart (2017), Manow (2018, chapter 6), and Rosenfeld (2019, 85).

[10] The first transformation, according to Dahl, occurred when non-democratic states turned into *assembly democracies* in the ancient city-state. The second transformation occurred with the emergence of *representative democracies* in the nation-state (cf. Dahl 1989, chapters 1 and 15).

[11] It is striking that this passage, 22 years prior to the Brexit referendum, provides an argument that anticipates why the Leave campaign's slogan, "Take Back Control," was myopic. Still, the success of this slogan is widely regarded to have been crucial to Leave's electoral success.

and the political decisions they have taken away from national representatives more far-reaching. Even at the national level, unelected bureaucrats and independent agencies exercise an increasing influence on public policy. For instance, senior officials in central banks make decisions of tremendous political import without being democratically accountable whatsoever, and multiple democracies have gradually expanded the power of unelected judges and strengthened the institution of judicial review over the past few decades (cf. Vibert 2007; Mounk 2018, 66–77). The upshot is that liberal democracies have become less democratic insofar as electoral majorities at the national level barely have the power to change, stop, or even reverse the processes that now determine their political fates (cf. Manow 2018, 37).

While the democratic pillar has been shrunk, the liberal pillar has been extended. The policy makers of contemporary Western democracies tend to be significantly more liberal than the overall population. To understand the reason for this, we need to briefly look at a social realignment that transformed Western societies in the post-war era, a development that Mark Bovens and Anchrit Wille (2017) describe as the rise of "diploma democracy." A diploma democracy is a political society in which highly educated citizens dominate basically all relevant political institutions, civil society organizations, and the media landscape; in which a tertiary education is a de-facto prerequisite for holding political office; and in which both formal (electoral) and informal (non-electoral) modes of political participation are primarily the domain of the highly educated. Since the 1960s, European democracies[12] have been subject to an "educational revolution" (2017, 18f.) over the course of which the availability of higher education has dramatically expanded. Paradoxically, this revolution has not made these societies more egalitarian. To the contrary, it has fostered the formation of a new self-sustained social segment that gradually outpaced other social groups in terms of economic success and social prestige.[13] Education is now key to understanding the increasing degree of social segregation. "The well-educated and

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[12] The six countries that Bovens and Wille have data for are the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Germany, Denmark, and the UK.

[13] Ironically, the removal of a long-standing social injustice – the exclusion of women from academia – has entrenched another social injustice: the dependence of children's life prospects on their family background. Women entering academia in significant numbers virtually allows the group of the highly educated to self-reproduce. Now, young academics meet their future partners at university, get children who are disproportionately likely to later got to university themselves, where they meet their future partners, and so forth. "25 percent of American marriages are today composed of two college graduates (compared to 3 percent in 1960)" (Markovitz 2019, 48). Social mixing across educational milieus barely takes place anymore, to the large disadvantage of those who are cut off from attaining academic credits (cf. Bovens and Wille 2017, 47f.; Eatwell and Goodwin 2018, 206).

the less well-educated live in different social worlds and do not mingle. They differ in health, in life expectancies, in wealth, and in income" (2017, 142; cf. Markovitz 2019, 202).

Crucially, educational attainment is a key predictor of someone's political outlook. Highly educated citizens tend to have political views which differ significantly from those of lesser educated citizens. The differences are particularly salient when it comes to cultural and economic issues. In both cases, education positively correlates with political outlooks that are socially more progressive and economically more conservative than the average. The combination of social progressivism and economic conservatism is characteristically liberal. In the US, citizens "who have attended graduate or professional school are six times as likely as those with a high school degree or less to hold 'consistently liberal' views" (Markovitz 2019, 212). More specifically, highly educated citizens often regard themselves as cosmopolitans. They are more likely to welcome ethnic diversity, endorse open borders, are in favour of deeper European integration, and embrace individual rights. They also tend to be more market-friendly and more open-minded towards foreign trade. In contrast, lesser educated citizens often have nationalist attitudes, want to limit immigration and are sceptical of supranational institutions; they value social conformity and appreciate clear social hierarchies (cf. Weakliem 2002; Bovens and Wille 2017, 147; Eatwell and Goodwin 2018, 28, 197; Galston 2018, 64f.; Runciman 2018, 163f.).

While the educational revolution has significantly increased the percentage of citizens with a tertiary education, they are still a minority. Lesser educated citizens make up around 70 percent of the electorate in Western Europe (cf. Bovens and Wille 2017, 5). However, in diploma democracies, the political sphere is dominated almost exclusively by the highly educated. Citizens with high educational attainments are more likely to vote and to be a member of a civil society organization, and far more likely to enter local or national parliaments or even to hold office. As an unsurprising result, the policy-making process is much more responsive to the political preferences of an educated minority with a disproportionately liberal outlook.

In sum, there are at least two major developments that have made liberal democracies increasingly liberal and decreasingly democratic: on the one hand, the growing impact of supranational institutions has diminished democratic accountability at the national level. On the other hand, these institutions, as well as other key sites of political society, are dominated by highly educated citizens whose political views tend to unilaterally diverge from the median. Consequently, contemporary liberal democracies are going through what is often called a "crisis of representation." The political views of a large segment of the population are strongly underrepresented in the

policy-making process. Moreover, political representatives are predominantly recruited from a specific social group, which has led to a widening social gulf between representatives and their constituents (cf. Runciman 2019, 40f.). In the eyes of many citizens, a better education does not make someone a better political representative.[14] What is more important to them is that their representatives are, at least in some respects, *like them*: they want them to have had similar experiences, dealt with comparable problems, share certain values, et cetera.[15] When this is not the case, citizens are less likely to regard parliamentarians as *their* representatives and more likely to see them as the members of a self-contained political class. When, on top of that, these representatives advance policies that systematically deviate from mainstream preferences, the consequence is an increasing dissatisfaction and distrust in politicians and political institutions.[16] Under these circumstances, political movements that nourish anti-elitist sentiments and promise to deprive the withdrawn elites of their power find a fertile soil.

3. The Populist Answer

Perhaps the most consequential ramification of these developments is the rise of so-called populist movements. Since the literature on populism is nearly endless, I will again limit myself to some rough remarks that suffice to set the stage for the anti-epistocratic argument I develop in the next section. In this section, I first discuss an influential account of how to conceptualise populism, before turning to the question of why populism, thus understood, is so harmful for liberal democracy.

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[14] In fact, the opposite seems to be the case. Campbell and Cowley (2013) analyse citizens' responses to toy political candidates who share all relevant characteristics but differ in educational attainment. It turns out that, all else equal, most people preferred the lesser educated candidate over the better educated one, a result that, as the authors note, "surprised (and depressed) us somewhat" (2013, 755).

[15] As Mansbridge (1999, 641ff.) has noted, a shared set of experiences can help to reduce communication barriers between the representatives and the represented.

[16] Darren McGarvey (2017, 37) provides a forceful first-hand account of this experience in his *Poverty Safari: Understanding the Anger of Britain's Underclass*: "This deficit, which appears to be widening, has led to a culture that leaves many people feeling excluded, isolated or misrepresented and, therefore, adversarial or apathetic (...). [T]he decisions that affect your life are being taken by a bunch of other people somewhere else who are deliberately trying to conceal things from you."

3.1 The ideational account of populism

"Populism" is a notoriously evasive term. Leading scholars in the field routinely open their discussions of it by remarking that it is a "particularly confusing concept" (Weyland 2001, 4), or even "one of the most widely used but poorly understood political concepts of our time" (Taggart 2002, 62); despite "all the talk about populism (…) it is far from obvious that we know what we are talking about" (Müller 2016, 2); it remains "unclear just what populism is" (Krastev 2007). Problematically, "populism" is not just a category of academic analysis but also a battle cry that frequently gets used pejoratively to dismiss political opponents. Tellingly, although we allegedly live in an "age of populism" (Krastev 2011), hardly anyone considers themselves a populist or a supporter of populism.[17]

In the recent literature, the most frequently employed approach to understanding populism is the so-called "ideational approach" (Mudde 2004, 2017). On this view, populism is a "thin-centred" ideology compatible with a range of both left-wing and right-wing outlooks on politics, society, and the economy.[18] At the heart of this ideology is the idea that society is "ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (…) of the people" (Mudde 2004, 543). Thus, Mudde takes *anti-elitism* to be the central feature of populism. Populists frame the conflict between "the people" and "the elites" in strongly moralizing terms. The people are "pure": hardworking, honest, and endowed with sanity, reason, and community spirit. In contrast, the elites are "corrupt": egoistic, devious, dishonest, withdrawn, and willing to take every opportunity to maximise their own advantage. Jan-Werner Müller (2016), another proponent of the ideational account, agrees with Mudde that populism is always anti-elitist. On his account, however, this is only a necessary but not yet sufficient condition for populism (2016, 2). "Populists do not just criticize elites; they also claim that they and only they represent the true people" (2016, 40). For Müller, the essence of populism is thus a conjunction of anti-elitism and "a moralized anti-pluralism" (2016, 20f.): only some people belong to "the people," and only the populists are their legitimate representatives.

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[17] Cf. Moffitt and Tormey (2013, 383) and Bergmann (2018, 6). A prominent exception is Steven Bannon, former chief strategist of the Trump administration, who takes himself to be in the business of establishing a "global populist movement": cf. "Steve Bannon Is Done Wrecking the American Establishment. Now He Wants to Destroy Europe's" (https://www.ny-times.com/2018/03/09/world/europe/horowitz-europe-populism.html [retrieved 15 June 2019].

[18] Cf. Manow (2018) for an account of the political and economic conditions that tend to foster the rise of left-wing populism and right-wing populism, respectively.

What exactly do populists mean when they invoke the notion of "the people"? On their understanding, "the people" is a homogenous group with homogenous interests. If conflicts of interest arise, populists do not question the idea of homogeneity but rather the integrity of the opposing individuals or groups: if your view does not conform with what they claim is "the will of the people," this merely shows that you do not really belong to "the people" and that your view may thus be discarded. Populism is a "pars-pro-toto project" (Urbinati 2017, 573): it allies itself with a particular political outlook and declares it to be the sole guideline for politics. Paulina Espejo (2017, 623) summarises the point as follows: "It is not that populists invoke the people that distinguishes populism from other ideologies: it is *how* they invoke the people. For populists, the fact that they are on the side of the people means that they are always right." By claiming to speak in the name of "the people," populists declare their specific view of the popular will as sacrosanct.[19]

The idea of a homogenous and infallible "people" is deeply at odds with a liberal understanding of political society. On the liberal view, "the society" is an essentially *open* category: who belongs to it is never determined once and for all but subject to constant inflows and outflows, renegotiations and reconsiderations (cf. Cohen 2019, 15f.). More importantly, it is a gathering point of different but equally legitimate perspectives and opinions. The very purpose of politics is to mediate between and to reconcile these opinions. In contrast, on the populist view, "the people" is a unified group with fixed boundaries. It is not merely a hypothetical category but something real and concrete.[20] It is not an object of political contestation but a subject in the political dispute, and the content of its will, whatever it may be, ought to determine policy.

The rise of populism in many Western democracies is often interpreted as a "backlash" against the social and political developments I sketched in section 2.2. According to a common view, populism responds to the "contradictions" (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018, 48), the "ambiguity" (Stoker and Hay 2016, 6), and the "perceived crisis of democratic legitimacy" (Hawkins et al. 2017, 268) of liberal democracy. It "raises issues that are entirely legitimate" (Kaltwasser 2014, 470; cf. Mouffe 2019,

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[19] Arato (2013, 156) goes as far as to claim that populism constitutes a "disguised political theology" in which the notion of "the people" takes the place formerly occupied by religious categories, thereby attempting to endow it with a kind of sacredness.

[20] Liberals tend to evade the notion of "the people" precisely because it is such an elusive concept. In Helmut Dubiel's (1985, 640; my translation) words, it is the "thing-in-itself of political theory. Although it is somehow fundamental for all political phenomena, it never fully coincides with any of their institutional or social manifestations."

159), "corrects inequalities in participation" between different socio-economic groups, especially between the highly and the lowly educated (Anduiza et al. 2019, 114), and ultimately constitutes one of democracy's "inevitable byproducts" (Yack 2019, 451). Now, if these descriptions are accurate, then we may conclude that the rise of populism is "not necessarily (...) the political catastrophe it is often perceived to be" (Bovens and Wille 2017, 166). At the same time, however, populism involves deeply problematic aspects that can potentially undermine rather than correct the functioning of liberal democracy. In the next section, I focus on one of these aspects: populism's hostility towards expertise and established knowledge-producing institutions.

3.2 Epistemic polarisation

Democracy has always had an uneasy relationship with expertise. On the one hand, expert knowledge is indispensable for public deliberations that aim to discover good solutions to complex questions. On the other hand, expertise is distributed unevenly across society, and this does not square well with the idea that all citizens should have an equal impact on political decisions. What, then, is the proper role for experts in a liberal democracy? According to the "classical view," experts and citizens should engage in "a distinctive division of epistemic and deliberative labor: science should deliver the facts, and just the facts, needed for political decision-making, whereas liberal democracy should make decisions on the basis of these" (Kappel and Zahle 2020, 397). The idea is that experts should *inform* political discussions without *dominating* them. All citizens should decide together which broad policy aims to pursue. Experts are needed, ex ante, to provide the factual information that bears on the decision, and ex post, to determine which concrete means are most suitable for realizing these broad policy aims (cf. Christiano 1996, chapter 5; Moore 2017; Nichols 2017).

The rise of populism undermines the division of epistemic labour between experts and citizens. For populists, experts are a subgroup of the "corrupt elites" which, as we have seen, they portray as the antagonists of "the people." On the populist view, these elites have viciously failed "the people": they pretend that what they do is in the best interest of the community, but in fact it merely serves their own benefit and helps them to secure their privileged position. The status quo, of which populists tend to paint a particularly grim picture, is the result of the elites' continual betrayal of the honest and hard-working people. Populism is thus closely connected with a general hostility towards experts and the institutions where they reside, like universities, think tanks, the established media, et cetera. On the populist trope, citizens must stop trusting these experts and instead rely on their own uncorrupted sense of what's good and what's bad,

what's true and what's fake. The "pure people" are better at finding solutions to social problems, if only they had the power to take their destiny into their own hands. Populists nurture the believe that "where established parties and elites have failed, ordinary folks, common sense, and the politicians who give them a voice can find solutions" (Spruyt, et al. 2016, 336).[21]

It is therefore no coincidence that the rise of populism has been accompanied by an erosion of trust in experts and established knowledge-producing institutions.[22] Populists specifically undermine the epistemic authority of these institutions by portraying their members as yet another combatant in the ongoing battle between "the people" and the "the elites." This has had a real impact on the way many citizens process information and form beliefs on politically relevant issues. Indeed, it has had an impact on the very idea of what it means to be "true," as Sophia Rosenfeld (2019, 9) highlights:

> "More citizens are convinced, according to recent studies, that there are no such things these days as impartial, consensual facts. More and more citizens are also convinced that there are no legitimate, trustworthy sources of disinterested information (...). 'Truth' has become personal, a matter of subjective feeling and taste and not much different from opinion."

The populist attack on established knowledge has blurred the boundaries between truth and opinion, expert judgement and lay assessment. The consequence is a state of epistemic disorientation (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019, chapter 6). In the complex world we live in, only a fraction of our knowledge is first-hand. For most issues, we must rely on the testimony of others. But whom do we trust? Because the authority of traditional expert-institutions is eroding, citizens are increasingly struggling to differentiate between credible and specious sources of information. This provides a fertile soil for the distribution of misinformation. As noted in chapter 3, falsities spread faster and get shared more often than the truth online. The result is a

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[21] The most infamous expression of this view is probably Brexit campaigner Micheal Gove's response to the question whether he could name any economic experts who think that leaving the EU was a good idea: "the people in this country have had enough of experts!" Cf. "Britain has had enough of experts, says Gove" (https://www.ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c [retrieved 20 June 2019]).

[22] To be sure, this too is multicausal development. I do not suggest that populism is the only driving force behind it, but that it is one of them.

cacophony of stories, rumours, assertions, and denials in which it is extremely hard to keep a clear view. Populism thrives on the resulting confusion: the more chaotic the exchange of information becomes, the easier it is to dismiss any individual claim to expertise.

Widespread disorientation undermines the very possibility of meaningful deliberation. It has frequently been noted that the societies of contemporary liberal democracies are increasingly polarised. However, as Nancy Rosenblum and Russel Muirhead (2019, 129ff.) note, it would be inaccurate to describe this polarisation merely as *political*: the issue is not or at least not only that people adopt more extreme political views and become more uncompromising. Rather, the polarisation is *epistemic*. In epistemically polarised societies, there is a "schism over what it means to know something" (Rosenblum and Muirhead 2019, 105). Citizens disagree about what reliable sources of information are, and what counts as evidence for the correctness of a given piece of information. Epistemic polarisation runs deeper and is arguably more worrisome than political polarisation: the latter might also be hard to reconcile, but at least opponents share a common ground of facts that all parties accept, although they might derive radically different conclusions from them. In contrast, to see that you and an opponent cannot agree on a shared account of political reality "is to see an abyss open up between you" (Rosenblum and Muirhead 2019, 131). Old-fashioned political disagreements cannot even get off the ground when citizens do not have a shared understanding of what is "real" and what is "fake." Where this shared understanding is lacking, disagreements occur at the prior and, for purposes of political deliberation, distinctly unfruitful level of the reconciliation of facts. As Rosenfeld (2019, 170) puts it, "epistemology has reemerged as a critical political battleground."

In sum, one reason why the rise of populism is harmful for liberal democracy is that it inculcates epistemic disorientation and thus precludes an effective exchange of reasons in political discourse. By attacking the epistemic authority of experts and established knowledge-producing institutions, populism prevents expertise from fruitfully bearing on public deliberation and ultimately blurs the line between "opinion" and "truth." However, liberal democracy requires a functioning division of labour between experts and citizens. Citizens can carry on with their lives only if they delegate numerous tasks to experts with the skills and knowledge to address them, and experts can play their proper role in the democratic process only if the public scrutinises their efforts critically, but in good faith (cf. Nichols 2017, 216). Populists actively contribute to an erosion of the conditions that allow this division of labour to work. Proponents of liberal democracy thus have to find ways to curb the demand

for populist narratives and to fight back epistemic polarisation. In an age of populism, meeting these desiderata, or at least contributing to their achievement, is a crucial criterion in the evaluation of every proposed institutional reform.

This is where Epistocratic Democracy re-enters the picture. Epistocrats sometimes cite the rise of populist movements to argue that the time is ripe for epistocratic reforms (cf. Brennan 2016a, 2016b; Moyo 2018, 205f.). As I will argue in the next section, however, this proposal rests on a serious misjudgement of the challenge that populism raises for liberal democracies today.

4. Politics on the Epistemic Battleground

How would implementing Epistocratic Democracy affect societies in which trust in democratic institutions is low and populism and epistemic polarisation are on the rise? The answer I suggest is very simple: it would make things worse. Epistocratic Democracy is ill-suited to mitigate the threat that populism poses for liberal democracy. To the contrary, in the long run, it is far more likely to exacerbate this threat.

Before I elaborate this claim, a caveat is in order: as mentioned, epistocrats neither claim that their proposal is a panacea against the rise of populism nor do they advocate epistocracy *merely* as a response to it. Instead, they suggest that the case for epistocracy rests on more principled reasons that hold irrespective of current political circumstances (cf. Brennan 2011a). It bears mentioning, however, that the interest in epistocracy has surged in recent years, and it seems plausible to assume that this development is related to the politics of the day. Proponents of epistocracy seem all but unhappy about this attention.[23] More importantly, some of them have suggested that the argument for epistocratic reforms is particularly strong in times when populism is on the rise. Take, for instance, the closing lines of an op-ed article Brennan (2016a) published one day after the Brexit referendum:

> "All across the West, we're seeing the rise of angry, resentful, nationalist, xenophobic and racist movements, movements made up mostly of low-information voters. Perhaps it's time to put aside the childish and

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[23] Cf. the preface of the second edition of Brennan's *Against Democracy*: "In 2016, democracy had a bad year. By contrast, critics of democracy had a good year. (...) I've been writing books and articles which challenge our most sacred ideas about political participation since 2009. Yet in 2016, people were unusually inclined to listen" (2017, vii).

magical theory that democracy is intrinsically just, and start asking the serious question of whether there are better alternatives. The stakes are high."

In a similar vein, Dambisa Moyo (2018, 168f.) includes a proposal to restrict the suffrage and introduce plural voting among her "ten radical reforms intended to revive the quality of political decision making in democracies," which are explicitly designed for "mature democracies like the United States, the nations of Western Europe, Canada, Japan, and Australia." She argues that this proposal will help to curb "the ultimate risk (…) that democracies could be increasingly built on a disillusioned, uninformed electorate and would only produce poor populist leaders who make bad policy" (2018, 206f.).

In short, epistocrats do suggest that their proposal is suitable to reinvigorate liberal democracy in an age of populism.[24] It is therefore appropriate to evaluate their proposal on these grounds. However, even if contemporary epistocrats refrained from advertising their proposal as a cure for current political ills, the argument I am going to make stands nevertheless: they misunderstand the significance of epistemic polarisation and thus recommend a proposal that is counterproductive in the current situation.

To see this point, let us suppose that one of the countries on Moyo's list were to implement Epistocratic Democracy or some other form of epistocracy. Almost certainly, this would lead to a reallocation of voting power to well-educated citizens. Regardless of which standards are used to allocate voting power, citizens with high educational credentials have a better chance to meet these standards. Moreover, the prospect of being tested might deter some citizens from voting, and it is plausible to assume that lesser educated citizens will be overrepresented among this group.[25] Epistocrats will not find this problematic. After all, enhancing the political impact of the

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[24] Given the title of his book, it might seem dubious to suggest that Brennan is in the business of making proposals to reinvigorate liberal democracy. As discussed in chapter 2, however, I take Brennan to argue not for an *alternative to democracy* but for an *alternative form of democracy*. In terms of the two-pillar model, he argues that liberal democracy needs a further decrease of the democratic pillar.

[25] Research on the causes of voter abstention suggests that part of the reason why people become habitual non-voters is that they do not know how the voting process (going to the polling station, entering the voting booth, dealing with the ballot, et cetera) works and want to avoid the embarrassment of being overburdened with the situation (cf. Plutzer 2002). In general, the more demanding the voting process, the more people are likely to be deterred by it. A voter exam will be particularly deterring for people who anticipate performing poorly.

well-educated is part and parcel of their proposal. As noted earlier, however, educational attainment is a key predictor of someone's political outlook. The well-educated form a remarkably homogenous group in which disproportionately liberal views on social, cultural, and economic issues pervade. Any electoral reform that enhances the impact of the well-educated is thus not going to be politically neutral. It will further advance the policy views of a social group that, in the "diploma democracies" that have emerged across the West, *already* dominates in both electoral and non-electoral venues of political participation.

Again, proponents of epistocratic reforms might not see anything objectionable here. Since part of their argument is that people with "high political IQs" favour markedly different policies than people with "low political IQs" (Caplan 2012, 320), the implementation of Epistocratic Democracy will *of course* not be politically neutral; it would be futile if it were. For epistocrats, its bias towards the political preferences of the well-educated is intended and desired. And since no other social group is less inclined towards the anti-elitist and anti-pluralist agenda of populists than the well-educated, enhancing their electoral impact will almost certainly cause populists to perform worse at the ballots than they currently do.

In the long run, however, this will turn out as a Pyrrhic victory over populism. An electoral reform that privileges the well-educated is bound to further decrease the sense of political efficacy among lesser educated groups. As Bram Spruyt et al. (2016) have shown, an experienced lack of political efficacy is the most reliable predictor for someone's support for populism. The authors of this study conclude that "politicians and parties who aim to decrease the demand for populism should primarily invest in reducing the (rather widespread) feeling that they are unresponsive to the concerns and grievances of voters" (2016, 344). Implementing Epistocratic Democracy would have the opposite effect: it would reinforce the sense that the political system neglects the views of many citizens, and is in fact deliberately designed to pay court to the privileged. It is thus likely to increase the demand for and the credibility of the populist narrative according to which "the elites" have deprived "the people" of any real influence and power. The more widespread this resentment becomes, the higher the risk that it will undermine citizens' willingness to abide by the outcomes of democratic procedures. Trust in democratic procedures and notably in the fairness of elections has already reached concerningly low levels.[26] This phenomenon is

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[26] Before the 2016 Presidential election in the US, 41 percent of all Americans and 73 percent of Republicans thought it was possible that the election would be rigged (cf. Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018,

particularly prevalent among lesser educated citizens (cf. Bovens and Wille 2017, chapter 8).

Given these circumstances, democrats must first and foremost be concerned about re-establishing the perceived procedural legitimacy of democratic institutions. An electoral reform that discounts the votes of citizens who are likely to disproportionately share a certain political outlook will undermine popular trust in the fairness of elections even further. This can have devastating consequences for social cohesion. If sufficiently many citizens perceive elections to be collusive, there is a real danger that they will seek out alternative means to bring about political change: "Where the franchise is severely restricted, extremist politicians and their followers tend to become conspiratorial, aggressive, and swollen with a sense of their own holy mission" (Holmes 2018, 402).[27]

Defenders of Epistocratic Democracy might reply that this does not show that there is anything wrong with the epistocratic proposal itself. The problem is not that the proposal is bad but that citizens are likely to misunderstand it. Epistocrats might say that we should not suspend reasonable electoral reforms just because we fear the reaction of populist demagogues and their supporters. Instead, we should try our best to convince citizens that Epistocratic Democracy can produce electoral outcomes that are advantageous for everyone.

This reply misjudges the nature of the problem that populism poses for liberal democracies. Proponents of epistocracy seem to assume that supporters of populists are uninformed. They assume that support for populism is based on people's erroneous belief that populists will deliver policies that will genuinely promote their interests. As I argued above, however, populism thrives not on ignorance but on misinformation, disorientation, and the resulting epistemic polarisation of society. Implementing Epistocratic Democracy might work smoothly in a society that primarily struggles with the problem of *ignorance*: if there is a broad consensus on a certain set of facts citizens need to know to be competent voters, but many citizens, for whatever reason, fail to learn about these facts, then citizens might accept the idea of implementing an election-specific knowledge test to enhance the epistemic quality of electoral outcomes. However, implementing Epistocratic Democracy is likely to cause major disruptions in societies that primarily struggle with the problem of

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61). The events around the 2020 election, which took place only a few days before this dissertation was completed, constitute the most distressing outgrowth of this development to date.

[27] On the relation between populism and conspiracy theories, cf. Müller (2016, 32f.), Eatwell and Goodwin (2018, 46f.), and Bergmann (2018).

epistemic polarisation: if citizens disagree on what the facts are and how to establish them, even the most judiciously designed election-specific knowledge test will be regarded as partisan by some and will thus not be accepted as a neutral arbiter of voter competence. In epistemically polarised societies, there can be no neutral inquiry of facts. Any specification of what voters have to know to qualify as competent inevitably has to take a stance in the controversy about whose facts count, whose perception of reality is accurate, and what it means to be knowledgeable.

The problem that the rise of populism imposes on liberal democracy is, as I argued above, that of epistemic polarisation rather than ignorance. The former is more fundamental than the latter: only once there is widespread agreement on what citizens need to know to vote competently can we turn to the question of whether enough citizens are competent by these standards. Due to the impact of populism's attack on expertise and established knowledge-producing institutions, however, citizens agree less and less on what they need to know. They do not even agree on what counts as sources of information and what it means for a putative fact to be validated or falsified. Any institutional reform, electoral or otherwise, that seeks to protect liberal democracy against these populist attacks first has to address the deep-running epistemic divide they have caused. The proposal to implement Epistocratic Democracy fails in this respect. It puts the cart before the horse. It assumes that a lack of political knowledge is causal for the rise of populism but neglects the subversive effect the rise of populism has had on the very category of "political knowledge." By trying to address the problem of ignorance while leaving the problem of epistemic polarisation unresolved, Epistocratic Democracy would accelerate the erosion of trust in democratic institutions, further undermine the perceived legitimacy of electoral outcomes, and increase the demand for populism. It would exacerbate the social conflict about who "owns" political reality and thus incur the danger of undermining the very point of having elections: to settle political controversies peacefully.

To conclude this line of argument, I want to put it in the context of a broader discussion on the relation between populism and *technocracy*. Technocracy can be defined as "a system of government in which technically trained experts rule in virtue of their specialized knowledge and position" (Fischer 1990, 17).[28] Technocracy and populism occupy polar ends on a spectrum: while supporters of the latter condemn

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[28] Haring (2010) points out a general ambiguity in the usage of the term, where some authors (Fischer 1990; Herzog 2004) employ a "normative-ideological", others (Beck 1977; Lübbe 2000) an "analytical-descriptive" notion of technocracy. Simply put, the difference is that the former approach understands technocracy as *the rule of the experts*, while the latter understands it as *the rule of practical necessities*. For present purposes, I stick with the normative-ideological notion.

the "corrupt elites" in the name of "the pure people," advocates of the former condemn "the irrational people" in the name of "the enlightened elites." A popular metaphor to characterise the relation between the two is that of "mirror images" (Mudde 2004, 543; 2017, 34; Urbinati 2014, 165; Kaltwasser 2014, 479; Galston 2018, 117). Similarly, others describe populism and technocracy as "two sides of the same coin" (Bickerton and Accetti 2017, 201) that share an "unexpected affinity" (Wassermann 2018, 240; my translation) insofar as they pose "opposite but related threats" (Rummens 2017, 567) to liberal democracy: they are "different manifestations of anti-pluralism" (Müller 2019, 10; my translation) and fight "many of the same battles using many of the same weapons" (Rosenfeld 2019, 135). In short, technocracy is often seen as "populism reversed" (Wolkenstein 2015, 116). Just like populists, technocrats reject the idea that politics aims at the reconciliation of a plurality of different but equally legitimate standpoints. While populists discard the views of those who they do not count among "the people," technocrats discard the views of those who they perceive to be less rational and less sophisticated than "the experts." Both dismiss lengthy deliberations between opposing viewpoints as tedious and unnecessary: why bother with debates when you regard the answer to a given political question as incontrovertible? For both populists and technocrats, the value of democratic procedures hinges on whether their outcomes converge with these pre-determined solutions.[29]

It is thus widely acknowledged that an expansion of technocratic government is a counterproductive response to the rise of populism. Indeed, it is seen as tantamount to "fighting fire with fire" (Kaltwasser 2014, 500). I argue that a similar criticism applies to epistocracy. Technocracy and epistocracy are not the same but share many important features. While technocracy, according to the definition above, empowers citizens with verified expertise in a specific domain, epistocracy allocates more power to citizens with decent levels of political knowledge without necessarily being experts in any specific area. Note, however, that the distinction is vague: as we have seen, there are many different forms of epistocracy, some of which are more and some of which are less technocratic. It is remarkable that, despite the obvious parallels between these two concepts, no contemporary epistocrat has, to my knowledge, ever

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[29] For Urbinati (2014), both populism and technocracy therefore constitute "disfigurements" of democracy. Interestingly, Urbinati accuses proponents of epistemic theories of democracy of abetting the technocratic disfigurement. On her view, the claim that the legitimacy of democracy is at least partly due to its capacity to yield "correct" outcomes rests on the same fatal idea that there is but one optimal response to a given political problem (cf. also Müller 2016, 119, fn. 41; 2017, 594; Rosenfeld 2019, 95f.).

addressed the question of how epistocracy relates to (and how it differs from) technocracy.[30] The account of Epistocratic Democracy I gave above certainly belongs to the less technocratic forms of epistocracy, because it employs a moderate standard of political knowledge and does not attempt to empower a narrow group of experts. Still, by adding further to the elitist bias in decision-making, it is more likely to increase than to reduce the demand for populism. Epistocratic Democracy tackles populism at the level of its symptoms – that is, at the level of electoral outcomes – while reinforcing its causes. The approach to respond to the populist backlash against liberal democracy with an elitist backlash against populism is not the solution to the problem but the next loop in a vicious circle.

5. Outlook

In this chapter, I evaluated the epistocratic proposal in light of some current political developments in the countries that this proposal is allegedly designed for, namely the mature liberal democracies of the West. Across these countries, the decline of democratic accountability at the national level and the rise of "diploma democracy" have led to an erosion of trust in democratic institutions and procedures to deliver policies that advance the interests of the majority. This erosion of trust is particularly pronounced among lesser educated citizens who notice a widening social gap between their political representatives and themselves. The rise of populism is at least partly a response to these developments. The populist answer to the crisis of liberal democracy is to put the "corrupt elites" in their place and to return political power to their rightful owners, "the people." This sounds like a laudable goal. However, populism is not a welcome corrective to the deficiencies of liberal democracy. As a political ideology, it is antagonistic and destructive. In particular, its systematic attacks on expertise and established knowledge-producing institutions undermine the division of epistemic labour between citizens and experts that is vital for the functioning of liberal democracy. Populism abets and thrives on a growing epistemic polarisation that blurs the boundaries between truth and opinion, expert judgement and lay assessment. A crucial task for proponents of liberal democracy today is to find ways to

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[30] The only author I am aware of who discusses this question is Runciman (2018, 180f.). He argues that while technocracy is merely an "add-on" to democracy, epistocracy is an entirely different form of government. I disagree with this distinction for the reasons given in chapter 2: epistocracy, at least in its more plausible forms, does not constitute an entirely different form of government either.

counteract epistemic polarisation and to restore public trust in democratic institutions and procedures.

To achieve these aims, many political theorists now think that far-reaching institutional reforms are necessary. Several of them have focussed on elections as one particular institution that is in need of reforms. Some argue for abolishing elections entirely, while others want to modify them. Proponents of epistocracy belong to the latter group. Some suggest that adopting an epistocratic voting scheme can curb the rise of populism and improve liberal democracy.

I argued against this view. Those who advertise epistocracy as a remedy for the rise of populism misjudge the nature of the threat that populism raises for liberal democracy. But even if epistocrats refrain from claiming that their proposal can curb the rise of populism, my argument still shows why their proposal is counterproductive. Adopting it would further decrease trust in democratic procedures, exacerbate epistemic polarisation, and fuel the demand for populism even more. This argument complements the point I made in the previous chapter, where I argued that the additional formal inequality Epistocratic Democracy incurs fails to meet a necessary condition for legitimacy. Together, the moral argument of chapter 4 and the pragmatic argument of this chapter constitute a comprehensive case against Epistocratic Democracy.

There is not much to be gained from a mere critique of Epistocratic Democracy, however. In what follows, I want to develop the more constructive upshots of this critique. I will argue against the voting age and for the political enfranchisement of the young. The argument comes in two parts, which broadly correspond to the arguments of this chapter and the last: first, I argue that the disenfranchisement of people below a certain age is incompatible with the anti-epistocratic commitment to the equal enfranchisement of everyone above that age; in other words, the formal inequality present in Standard Democracy fails to meet the conditions for legitimacy too. Second, I complement this principled argument with an instrumental point: the enfranchisement of the young can enhance the epistemic quality of democratic procedures and foster young people's allegiances to these procedures in the long run, and thus help to curtail the danger of democratic deconsolidation. Just like proponents of epistocracy, I thus suggest an electoral reform and a reallocation of voting power. Within this approach, however, I take the opposite direction.

Does Epistemic Proceduralism Justify the Disenfranchisement of Children?

1. Introduction

"The history of democracy is one of increasing enfranchisement, as women, non-whites, propertyless, and other second-class citizens became at long last trusted in their capacity to vote and participate responsibly in political life," Landemore (2013, 17) writes in the opening passage of her book *Democratic Reason* (which I also quote in the epigraph). Indeed, women were denied the right to vote until the early 1920s (and in some places much longer); and in the southern states of the US, the literacy tests of the Jim Crow era were carefully crafted to disenfranchise Afro-American citizens. As noted before, no reasonable person can deny that these restrictions of the franchise were anti-democratic. Luckily, we might say, all of this is now water under the bridge. Contemporary liberal democracies, despite all their imperfections, are commonly understood to have overcome their exclusionary vices.

Still, there is one group of citizens that has everywhere and always been excluded from the electorate: children. The disenfranchisement of people below a certain age is so deeply entrenched in our democracies that it rarely even strikes us as questionable. Because it is so common, I suggested the label "Standard Democracy" for the view that

(1) all adult citizens should be enfranchised[1] and

(2) all children should be disenfranchised.

On this account, the defining feature of Standard Democracy is the voting age. As noted above, most democratic countries set this age at 18 years, but some set it as low as 16 and some as high as 25. Standard Democrats might disagree on what the voting age should be, exactly.[2] They agree, however, that there is some age above which all citizens should have the right to vote and below which no citizen should have the right to vote. For present purposes, I define all citizens above that age (whatever it may be) as "adults" and everyone below it as "children."

Standard Democracy faces two challenges. Some proponents of epistocracy challenge claim (1). More precisely, proponents of what I have called (in chapter 2) exclusionary epistocracy hold that all citizens who do not meet a certain standard of competence should be denied the right to vote (cf. Caplan 2009; Brennan 2011a). This will presumably apply to most children but also to many adult citizens. In other words, proponents of exclusionary epistocracy want to make the electorate *more exclusive*. There are also some people, however, who challenge claim (2). Either for the sake of intergenerational justice (cf. van Parijs 1999) or as a matter of principle (cf. Kiesewetter 2009), they have argued for the inclusion of young people in the electorate. Instead of employing a voting age, some have suggested that citizens should be allowed to enfranchise themselves, regardless of age, through a simple registration process (cf. Cook 2013; Tremmel and Wilhelm 2015). Proponents of this approach want to make the electorate *more inclusive*.

In this chapter, I argue that these two challenges put Standard Democracy in a predicament that ultimately renders the view untenable. Standard Democracy requires a two-pronged justification for why *all* (the argument against epistocracy) and *only* (the argument for the voting age) adults should be enfranchised. I argue that there is no justification of democracy that meets both desiderata. Standard Democrats have to give up either their commitment to the enfranchisement of all adults or to the voting age. If my arguments in the previous two chapters are on the right track,

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[1] Recall that many democracies disenfranchise some parts of the adult population, such as felons, expatriates, foreign residents, and mentally handicapped citizens. However, except for the latter group (to which many of my arguments in this chapter will also apply), their exclusion is not based on a presumption of incompetence, so I bracket them for present purposes.

[2] For instance, there is a continuing debate on whether the voting age should be lowered to 16. For some contributions to this debate, cf. Cowley and Denver (2004), Chan and Clayton (2006), Hart and Atkins (2011), Wagner et al. (2012), Zeglovits (2013), Douglas (2017), and Peto (2017).

Standard Democrats should maintain the former commitment and reject epistocracy. In that case, they need to give up the latter commitment and endorse the enfranchisement of children.

In section 2, I briefly assess three unsuccessful justifications for Standard Democracy: the arguments from fairness, equality, and autonomy, respectively. All three arguments might give a strong justification for Standard Democracy's first commitment but fail to justify the second commitment. Section 3 moves on to develop what I take to be the most promising argument to yield the two-pronged justification for Standard Democracy: an argument from competence, derived from Estlund's (2008) epistemic proceduralism. As I try to explain in section 4, however, this argument does not vindicate Standard Democracy either. I conclude that endorsing the universal enfranchisement of adult citizens is incompatible with endorsing the voting age. This is a rather theoretical point, and some might object that it is only of theoretical interest. In practice, they might object, the voting age is an indispensable feature of democracy. In response to this objection, section 5 briefly addresses some practical concerns regarding the enfranchisement of children. This dimension of my argument will be developed more fully in chapter 7.

2. The Arguments from Fairness, Equality, and Autonomy

In democratic theory, justifications for enfranchising all adult citizens abound. In contrast, justifications for the exclusion of citizens below a certain age are less common, perhaps because it is often seen as self-explanatory. In this section, I consider three arguments for enfranchising all adult citizens. My interest here is not in whether these arguments succeed but rather in the following question: given that they succeed, do these arguments simultaneously yield a justification for why the franchise should be *limited* to adults? In other words, does any of these arguments provide the two-pronged justification Standard Democracy requires? I argue that neither of them does.

2.1 Fairness

According to a common view, equal voting rights are owed to all adult citizens as a matter of fairness. This view builds on the idea that "everyone subject to a common set of coercive rules and policies is entitled to equal consideration in their construction" (Anderson 2009, 219). Equal consideration implies that all citizens have an

equal say in the construction of rules and policies, and the appropriate way to give citizens a say is to give them the vote. Since all adult citizens are subject to the jurisdiction of the country they live in, all of them should be given the vote. This is, roughly, how the argument from fairness justifies enfranchising *all* adults.

Does the argument also justify enfranchising *only* adults? This would be the case if it can be shown that children are not subject to the jurisdiction of the polity. However, this is obviously not true. Childhood is not a pre-political state outside the law. To the contrary, it is regulated in many ways that adulthood is not (take, for instance, compulsory schooling). Therefore, if everyone who is subject to the jurisdiction must be given the vote, then the fairness-based argument for enfranchising all adults is simultaneously an argument for enfranchising children (cf. Beckman 2009, 98).

Perhaps a weaker understanding of the fairness argument is more suitable for the purposes of Standard Democrats. On this understanding, someone may be denied a say in political procedures if they are not subject to the law *to full degree*. Adults bear many legal obligations children do not bear. For instance, children are not liable for (many) damages they may cause. It might thus be argued that fairness requires a correlation between legal obligations and political rights. On this view, citizens who are not subject to the full bundle of legal obligations are not entitled to the full bundle of political rights, including the right to vote.

This weaker reading faces two problems. First, there is a worry about proportionality. It is true that the law treats children with more leniency in some respects, but this does not alter the fact that, as noted, children are severely affected by the society's legislation. The gradual differences in legal treatment between children and adults seem too insignificant to justify withholding a major political right, such as the right to vote, from one group but not from the other. Second, and more importantly, the argument might on this reading go further than Standard Democrats want it to go. Consider that many adults are exempted from specific legal obligations, too. For example, adults whose income is below a certain threshold are often exempted from the legal obligation to pay taxes. If it is permissible to deny the right to vote to anyone who is not subject to the full bundle of legal obligations, then many adult citizens can be excluded as well. This, however, violates Standard Democracy's first commitment.

2.2 Equality

Another argument for affording voting rights to all adult citizens proceeds from the principle of equality, according to which equal status requires equal treatment. On this view, all adult citizens are one another's equals in the relevant respect. The most

common interpretation of this claim is that they have equal moral status. It can also be interpreted legally: all adults are equal before the law. And as we have seen (in chapter 1), some also offer an epistemic reading of this view: they hold that no individual citizen can make a claim to superior political expertise and that citizens are therefore *epistemic peers* when it comes to politics (cf. Fuerstein 2008; Peter 2016; Ebeling 2017). Regardless of whether we employ the moral, legal, or epistemic interpretation, the argument is that all adult citizens are owed equal voting rights in virtue of their equal status.

The flipside of the principle of equality is that unequal status warrants different treatments. One might argue that this is how the argument from equality accounts for the electoral exclusion of children. On this view, children do not have the same status as adults and may therefore be treated differently, which includes denying them the right to vote. However, this view is implausible on any of the three interpretations of "equal status." First, nobody will want to argue that children are of lesser moral status than adults. If adults are owed equal voting rights merely in virtue of their equal moral worth, then children are owed voting rights, too. Second, the claim that children do not have the same legal status as adults is of course correct. In a sense, children are not full citizens yet, which is expressed in the fact that the state does not, for example, draft them for the military, request them to sit on juries, make them liable to compulsory insurances, et cetera. We cannot infer from this, however, that it is permissible for the state to deny children the right to vote. Such an argument is circular. It starts from the proposition that the state *does* treat children differently in legal matters and concludes that, therefore, it *may* treat them differently. This argument does not explain what *warrants* the differential legal treatment of children and adults.

Some might say that such an explanation can easily be given: due to their developmental stage, children lack many of the capacities that adults have. This suggests that the unequal treatment of children and adults is ultimately warranted by the fact that they differ in competence, which leads us to the third interpretation of the argument from equality: Maybe children may be denied the right to vote because they are, in general, less competent than adults? At first glance, this looks plausible. However, Standard Democrats should be aware of a potential pitfall of this line of argument: if citizens may be denied the right to vote because they have low epistemic credentials, it might be unsuitable to warrant *both* commitments of Standard Democracy. The assumption that all adults have equal epistemic status is initially much less plausible than the claim they have equal moral status. In brief, if the argument from equality is interpreted in terms of moral status, it turns out to be too inclusive for the

purposes of Standard Democracy; if, on the other hand, it is interpreted in terms of epistemic status, there is a risk that it could turn out to be too exclusive. Still, I take a competence-based argument to be the most plausible approach to justify the disenfranchisement of children, and sections 3 and 4 will assess it in detail.

2.3 Autonomy

Finally, let us consider the approach to ground equal voting rights for all adults in their personal autonomy. On this view, the fundamental value of democracy is that it gives citizens the opportunity to self-legislate (cf. Rostbøll 2015; Wilson 2019). Citizens are free to determine how to live their lives, and this entails a right to co-determine collective decisions that affect them as members of the society. According to the argument from autonomy, all adult citizens are owed the right to vote because they are free to make decisions on their own behalf, both in the private and the political sphere.[3]

A possible strategy to employ the argument from autonomy in a case for the disenfranchisement of children is as follows: one could argue that children have not yet acquired the necessary level of autonomy to be entitled to a say in collective decisions. On this view, individuals may make decisions that affect other people only once they have developed the capacities necessary to make the decisions that affect themselves, and individuals lack this capacity up to a certain age. Below that age, they may be denied any rights that entail exercising power over others. Since exercising the right to vote, at least to an extent, does imply an exercise of power over others, it may be withheld from individuals who are not yet autonomous to make decisions for themselves and a fortiori for other people.[4]

This argument does not warrant both commitments of Standard Democracy either. To be sure, children lack the degree of autonomy that (most) adults possess, and their lack of autonomy justifies a degree of paternalism towards them that would rightly be considered unacceptable in the case of adults (cf. Schapiro 2003). For example, children may not decide to opt out of school, to buy alcohol, or to have sex. Still, this lack of autonomy justifies legal constraints on their activities only if

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[3] According to the "no impact objection," the negligible impact of each individual vote on the election result belies the claim that the act of voting constitutes an exercise of one's autonomy. Jacob (2015, 69) challenges this objection by developing an account of "basic autonomy," which "accepts that we have only limited control over our lives; it emphasises the way society shapes us, and centres on the notion of minimal reflexivity." On this view, an agent's action that virtually has no impact can nevertheless be regarded as an exercise of her basic autonomy.

[4] A view along these lines is endorsed, for instance, by Brettschneider (2007, 77).

engaging in these activities would impose a significant risk of harm on themselves or others (cf. Wiland 2018, 222). This is not the case for several activities, and for that reason children enjoy a right to engage in them although their developmental lack of autonomy prevents them from exercising these rights meaningfully. For instance, children enjoy political rights such as the freedom of speech or opinion. Having these rights might be quite futile for them up to a certain age, but it hurts neither themselves nor anyone else that they do. The question, therefore, is what category the activity of voting belongs to: would children, by engaging in it, inflict a serious risk of harm on themselves or others? If so, they may be denied the right to engage in this activity. However, given the negligible impact of each individual vote, this is implausible. Individually, children would hurt neither themselves nor anyone else even if they reliably voted for the most horrific options on the ballot. Therefore, their lack of autonomy does not justify denying them the right to vote.

A proponent of Standard Democracy will object that my response underestimates the harmful impact that children could have *collectively* if they were given the right to vote. If millions of children are enfranchised and they all vote terribly, they can cause significant damage both to themselves and others (although each of their individual votes does not). This objection seems forceful. It corresponds to the folk rationale for disenfranchising children, which holds that they lack the knowledge and maturity to engage in a business as serious as voting. Note, however, that this rationale shifts the focus from children's alleged lack of *autonomy* to their alleged lack of *competence*. The most promising strategy for proponents of Standard Democracy, then, is to elaborate this argument and to employ an epistemic account of voting to justify the disenfranchisement of children.[5] In the next section, I develop such an argument from competence based on Estlund's (2008) epistemic proceduralism.

3. The Argument from Competence

Recall that Estlund employs an "epistemic approach to politics, morally constrained by a general acceptability requirement" (2008, 39). This approach renders epistemic

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[5] I take the idea that children must be excluded due to a lack of competence (rather than autonomy or equal status in society) to be widely shared. It is expressed, for instance, in Dahl (1989, 126f.): "That we cannot get around the principle of competence in deciding on the inclusiveness of the demos is decisively demonstrated by the exclusion of children. (...) The only defensible ground on which to exclude children is that they are not yet fully qualified." Cf. also Christiano (2008, 128ff.).

proceduralism a particularly promising candidate to provide the two-pronged justi-
fication Standard Democracy requires. First, the idea that there are moral constraints
on the pursuit of epistemically optimal arrangements arguably warrants Standard
Democracy's first commitment. The notion of qualified acceptability requires that
equal voting rights be afforded to all adult citizens and thus rules out epistocracy.
Second, employing an epistemic approach to democracy within these constraints ar-
guably justifies Standard Democracy's second commitment. The idea that demo-
cratic procedures must be better than random at yielding the right outcomes implies
that the electorate must meet a threshold of collective competence. For that reason,
epistemic proceduralism might offer the resources to explain what is wrong with en-
franchising children (although Estlund does not address this issue himself):[6] if all
qualified points of view can accept that the enfranchisement of children would re-
duce collective voter competence below a certain level, their exclusion can be justi-
fied.

What exactly is the level below which collective voter competence may not fall?
There are two possibilities. On a first reading, the voting age is justified if all qualified
points of view can accept that it is necessary to keep collective voter competence
above the better-than-random threshold. Standard Democrats then have to show
that an electorate which included children would be worse than chance at making
the right political decisions. On a second reading, the voting age is justified if all qual-
ified points of view can accept that abandoning it would make the electorate less ep-
istemically reliable than it otherwise would be. Standard Democrats then have to
show that an electorate which includes children would be worse at making the right
political decisions than an electorate that excludes them. They might succeed at this
task even if an electorate that includes children would still be better than random.

In this chapter, I focus on the first reading. Proponents of Standard Democracy
might complain that this is the easier route for me. Perhaps the electorate would still
be better than random at making the right decisions if there was no voting age. Still,
it might be the case that all qualified points of view can accept that democratic

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[6] He briefly touches upon this point in a footnote (2003, 68, fn. 17): "The disenfranchisement of
children is [a] formal inequality I am inclined to defend. (…) it raises an important challenge to my
main line of argument, as Francis Shrag [sic] has suggested to me." In fact, some proponents of en-
franchising children have argued that Estlund's demographic objection to epistocracy rules out the
exclusion of children for the same reason why it rules out the exclusion of adults (cf. Schrag 2004,
370; Lecce 2009, 135; Cook 2013, 443f.). Others have argued the same but take this to be a *reductio
ad absurdum* of the demographic objection rather than an argument *for* enfranchising children (cf.
Brennan 2011a, 718; Lippert-Rasmussen 2012, 252).

procedures are more reliable if there is a voting age in place. On the second reading, this would suffice to justify Standard Democracy. To rule out this possibility, I need to make a more ambitious argument to the effect that a democracy without a voting age would be *at least as good*, epistemically speaking, as Standard Democracy. This will be the task of the next chapter. In fact, I go even further and argue that adopting Ageless Democracy would *enhance* the epistemic capacity of democracy. The purpose of this chapter is more moderate: I try to show that the enfranchisement of children will not preclude democratic procedures from meeting the conditions for legitimacy that epistemic proceduralism sets out. A democracy that abandons the voting age would still be better than random at making the right decisions. To establish this, I need to refute the following argument from epistemic proceduralism (AEP for short) that Standard Democrats can advance:

> *AEP*
>
> (1) For democratic procedures to be legitimate, they must at least be better than random at yielding the right political decisions.
>
> (2) For the electorate to be collectively better than random at making the right political decisions, the average voter must be sufficiently competent, that is, individually better than random at making the right political decisions.
>
> (3) To ensure that, on average, voters are sufficiently competent, we must either employ individual tests or statistical discrimination.
>
> (4) Employing individual tests is not acceptable from all qualified points of view.
>
> (5) One kind of statistical discrimination, namely age-based discrimination, is acceptable from all qualified points of view.
>
> (6) There is an age such that, at or above that age, citizens are on average sufficiently competent, and below that age citizens are on average not sufficiently competent.
>
> (7) Therefore, for democratic procedures to be legitimate, all citizens at or above that age ("adults") should be enfranchised and all citizens below that age ("children") should be disenfranchised.

I take an argument along these lines to be the most promising one that Standard Democrats can offer. Before proceeding to my critique of this argument, the remainder of this section will elaborate its premises in more detail.

Premise (1) is a core claim of epistemic proceduralism. Premise (2) asserts that this claim puts the electorate under a collective-competence requirement, which in turn hinges upon the individual competence levels of its members. The electorate can be

better than random at making the right decisions only if its members are, on average, better than random at making these decisions.[7] What competence do voters need to meet this requirement? Obviously, there is no determinate answer to this question on this level of generality. It seems plausible, however, that regardless of the more specific competencies voters might need (which will presumably vary depending on the issue), they at least have to have "a minimum ability to understand, elaborate and critically reflect on principles of morality" (Christiano 2001, 203f.). Having this ability is a prerequisite for understanding voting as an activity that aims at finding the best solutions to the problems facing the community, irrespective of one's standards for what the best solutions are. This alone might not be sufficient to be better than random at making the right decisions, but it is plausibly necessary.[8]

Premise (3) enumerates two methods to ensure that average individual voter competence will not drop below the relevant threshold: an *individualist approach* to design a test for the relevant competence, which every citizen would have to pass prior to enfranchisement; and a *statistical approach* to distinguish between subgroups of the citizenry, according to their expected competence, which automatically enfranchises citizens if they belong to a subgroup that is expected to be sufficiently competent on average, and automatically disenfranchises them if they don't. Importantly, premise (3) states that, for the electorate to meet the collective competence requirement, someone has to be disenfranchised, and the set of options is exhausted by the individualist and the statistical approach.

Not every method of exclusion is viable, however. At this stage, the qualified acceptability requirement comes in. Premise (4) asserts that individual competence tests, like the ones that most forms of epistocracy would employ, violate this requirement. Their implementation would raise manifold problems. Here are only some of

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[7] Some might deny this. For instance, if the "miracle of aggregation" (cf. chapter 2) is true, premise (2) is false. As noted above, however, even epistemic democrats are sceptical whether the conditions of the "miracle" hold in real-world democratic contexts.

[8] It bears mentioning, however, that this standard is already more demanding than the actual standards adult citizens are held to in many democracies. In the US, for example, adults are considered competent if they can express a preference, whatever it might be. If a voter who suffers from dementia wishes to vote for F.D.R., she might do so. In a recent *New York Times* article, Jason Karlawish, co-director of the Penn Memory Center, explains the reason for this policy: "Voters with normal cognition may write in the name of Mickey Mouse, select the first person on the ballot, whoever that might be, and otherwise behave less than rationally. 'We can't hold certain people to standards that we don't hold everyone else to, when it's a matter of a fundamental right,' Dr. Karlawish said." Cf. "Having Dementia Doesn't Mean You Can't Vote" (https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/14/health/election-voting-seniors-dementia.html?referring Source=articleShare [retrieved 22 October 2020]).

the objections that might reasonably be advanced against individual tests (cf. Schrag 1975, 453ff.; Clayton 2006, 187; Rehfeld 2011, 148). First, it will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to devise a test of political maturity that will be commonly considered fair and reliable. Screening for voter competence is significantly harder than, say, screening for the competence to drive, and this would make these tests costly and their results contentious. Second, individuals who fail the test might remain permanently disenfranchised, which could impair their self-esteem, negatively influencing other aspects of their lives. Third, tests are likely to disproportionately favour more affluent social classes. Fourth, tests invoke a potential of corruption and abuse of power by the test designers. For all or at least some of these reasons, individual tests are not acceptable from all qualified points of view.

A statistical approach might solve these problems. The idea behind premise (5) is to give up on screening for the relevant competence directly and rather to employ a secondary feature as a proxy. Not every kind of statistical discrimination is acceptable, however. Consider flatly excluding everyone who is shorter than 60 inches. This proxy might be effective in the sense that it would warrant a sufficiently competent electorate.[9] But those who are excluded might raise reasonable objections to this approach. Some people who happen to be very short would be disenfranchised permanently, and they can complain that depriving them of the vote merely because they do not meet an arbitrary physical condition fails to treat them respectfully.

Disenfranchisement based on age, in contrast, is often seen as a particularly apt way of applying the statistical approach (cf. Cohen 1975, 461f.; Clayton 2006, 186; Brighouse and Fleurbaey 2010, 149; Rehfeld 2011, 148). On the plausible assumption that at least up to a certain age political maturity increases continually, we have reason to believe that age-based discrimination distinguishes between competent and incompetent citizens with sufficient accuracy. Furthermore, it is easy to implement and very transparent. It does not favour or disadvantage any social group, race, or gender, and nobody will be disenfranchised permanently. The age limit is commonly accepted and unlikely to ever cause any political turmoil. To be sure, some competent children will remain disenfranchised and some incompetent adults will be enfranchised. Overall, however, implementing an age limit is both the fairest means available and effective to ensure that the electorate meets the standard for collective competence. Therefore, the argument holds, it is acceptable to all qualified points of view.

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[9] In fact, employing this or a similar proxy might result in (dis)enfranchising almost the same group of people that are excluded by the current age criterion.

Premise (6) holds that there is an age for which it is true that it divides the citizenry in two subgroups, one of which is and one of which is not sufficiently competent on average. For Standard Democracy to go through, it is not relevant where exactly the age limit is. What matters is that all citizens below it can legitimately be disenfranchised, while all citizens at or above it must be included in the electorate. The conclusion asserts that we should employ this age, whatever it is, to divide the citizenry into eligible voters ("adults") and those who are excluded from the vote ("children"). This completes the competence argument from epistemic proceduralism for Standard Democracy.

4. Does Epistemic Proceduralism Justify the Disenfranchisement of Children?

My critique of this argument focusses on premises (3), (5), and (6). In section 4.1, I want to show that Standard Democrats face a dilemma that forces them to give up either their opposition against the unconditional disenfranchisement of children or against the unconditional enfranchisement of adults. I do not think that Standard Democrats can avoid this dilemma, but even if they can, I provide a further argument (in section 4.2) to show that they cannot appeal to the better-than-random requirement of epistemic proceduralism to justify disenfranchising children: to safeguard universal adult enfranchisement, Standard Democrats are compelled to endorse a very moderate collective competence requirement. This, in turn, commits them to a very low voting age. However, endorsing a very low voting age undermines the plausibility of their claim that the exclusion of children is necessary to preserve collective voter competence.

4.1 Qualified acceptability

Two alleged merits of age-based disenfranchisement are that it is *egalitarian* – the burdens it entails are equally imposed on all citizens – and *temporary* – it is just a matter of time until citizens are enfranchised (cf. Weale 1999, 154). Being egalitarian and temporary is not sufficient for an exclusion to be acceptable, however. If it was, then disenfranchisement below any arbitrarily chosen age would be acceptable. We could then disenfranchise everyone below the age of 40, for example. While James Mill (2015 [1828], §101-102) might have been quite serious when making this

proposal in the 19th century, most contemporary readers will certainly reject it (cf. Lau 2012, 868; López-Guerra 2014, 70).

In particular, being egalitarian and temporary is not sufficient to render the exclusion from a decision acceptable when the decision in question is path-dependent, that is, when it affects the very set of options available in future decisions. Political decisions clearly fall into this category. If, for instance, present voters constantly use their electoral power to support candidates and policies that delay the expansion of renewable energies, then future voters, once they come of age, will not face the same choice between developing renewable energies now or later. Eventually, fossil fuel will be depleted, and public policy will have to be made in face of the facts that past voters have created.

Path dependency is particularly problematic when the interests of present and future decision makers diverge. It has often been pointed out that children have different interests than adults, including some of which they are not yet aware (cf. Schrag 2004, 374; Cohen 2005, 230–34). I address this intergenerational aspect of my argument in more detail in the next chapter, but it is also relevant for the point at hand: since political parties and representatives compete only for the votes of adults, the political agenda is shaped by their interests. Disproportionate consideration of adults' interests affects the degree to which children will be able to pursue their interests once they are enfranchised. For this reason, the fact that the disenfranchisement of children is egalitarian and temporary does not suffice to make it acceptable.

Standard democrats might concede these points. They might agree that egalitarianism and temporariness alone do not render disenfranchisements acceptable, and that children's interests at least sometimes diverge from adults' interests. They could argue, however, that there is no point in letting someone pursue their interests if these interests are ill-conceived (cf. Hinrichs 2002; Christiano 2008, 129; Goerres and Tiemann 2009). According to this view, children would waste their votes on bad policy-proposals and inapt candidates because they are easily fooled by empty promises. They would thus cause massive damage at the ballots, not only setting back their own objective interests, but also those of adults, who would have to bear the consequences of children's short-sighted voting decisions too. Since disenfranchising children is necessary to prevent this damage, Standard Democrats could argue, it is acceptable to all qualified points of view.

Obviously, not all children are bad advocates of their own interests. Many of them have both the knowledge and the maturity to assess their interests reasonably, to understand the perspectives of other people whose interests might diverge, and to make a balanced decision based on these considerations. Standard Democrats will not deny

this. They might concede that age-based disenfranchisement is error-prone: it produces some individual injustices because it excludes some individuals although they are sufficiently competent to vote.[10] Still, they might insist that these individual injustices must be tolerated for the good of a competent electorate.

In that case, however, Standard Democrats should endorse any approach to enfranchisement that incurs less individual injustice while producing an equally or even more competent electorate. They are committed to the claim that flat disenfranchisement below a certain age is, despite its flaws, the best we can do. However, this claim is implausible. Sonia Grover (2011, 228) argues that "[i]f there were a genuine concern for voting competency, then all potential voters (…), regardless of age, would be (…) permitted to demonstrate that competency under fair conditions." She proposes a scheme with "a minimum voting age of 16 years with the vote granted automatically at 16, the vote granted to 14- and 15-year-olds on demand, and the vote for under 14s based on a *rebuttable presumption* of incompetence" (2011, 233; original emphasis). In a similar vein, Nicholas Munn (2012) suggests a system that allows citizens below the voting age to do a basic test to determine whether they have roughly the minimal competence we except adult voters to have. If they pass, they are enfranchised regardless of age. If they fail, they must wait until they are automatically enfranchised by age. By combining individual competence tests for some with the unconditional enfranchisement of others, these hybrid approaches would reduce the individual injustices that flat age-based disenfranchisement inevitably incurs. At the same time, they preserve or even raise collective voter competence. Therefore, it looks like Standard Democrats who are primarily concerned about collective voter competence ought to endorse the hybrid approach: making a certain age an indefeasible prerequisite of enfranchisement is not acceptable if there is a more just way to achieve the same end. However, accepting the hybrid approach is incompatible with Standard Democracy's commitment to disenfranchising all children.

Can proponents of Standard Democracy reject the hybrid approach? They might argue that, as we have seen, individual tests have many problematic features. To be sure, some of these problems might disappear if we only use them to enable competent children to attain the right to vote, not as a general requirement everyone must meet before being enfranchised. For instance, the worry that these tests will invite abuses of power by the test designers, arguably one of the core potential problems of competence tests, is presumably less pressing when tests are combined with

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[10] Likewise, it will include some individuals although they are not competent to vote, but unless you are an epistocrat, you might think that this type of error is less worrisome.

automatic enfranchisement at a certain age (cf. Munn 2012, 1055–58). But Standard Democrats might reply that individual tests are still objectionable. For example, they could appeal to the inevitable controversies about the standard of the test or invoke the plausible concern that children of wealthy families will have a disproportionately high chance of being enfranchised early. For these reasons, they could insist, flat age-based discrimination is the only acceptable option to ensure that the electorate is sufficiently competent.

This line of argument raises a new problem for Standard Democrats, however. If they take seriously the idea that flat age-based disenfranchisement is justified for the sake of a competent electorate, then presumably they should be as concerned about the expectable incompetence of very old voters. Joanne Lau (2012) calls this the *symmetry argument*. A certain level of competence, once attained, does not remain constant (or even gradually increase) over a life span. Since cognitive decline is a normal correlate of the ageing process (cf. Andrews-Hanna et al. 2007), age-related cognitive impairments are likely to reduce competence, eventually even below the level that AEP requires. Obviously, not all senior voters suffer from such impairments – but likewise, not all potential junior voters are immature. The point is that statistical considerations suggest disenfranchisement above a certain age just like they do below a certain age.

The symmetry argument implies that there is an age at or above which citizens are, on average, not sufficiently competent to vote, and below which citizens are, on average, sufficiently competent. This is the inverse of premise (6) of AEP. If Standard Democrats claim that it is permissible to disenfranchise citizens who belong to an age group whose members are, on average, not sufficiently competent to vote, then they should endorse disenfranchisements on both ends of the age-spectrum. This point might be of merely theoretical significance because hardly anyone might reach the ripe old age where statistical considerations warrant disenfranchisement. However, this does not resolve the general problem for Standard Democrats:[11] accepting age-based disenfranchisement above any age is incompatible with their commitment to the enfranchisement of *all* adults.

In sum, Standard Democrats who employ AEP claim that an age-based approach avoids the problems that render individual or other statistical approaches to disenfranchisement unacceptable. As we have seen, however, the age-based approach faces problems of its own: due to the path dependency of political decisions, citizens may

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[11] If hardly anyone reaches the age in question, the symmetry argument would, in Lau's (2012, 865) terms, still "hold but not actually obtain."

reasonably object against being excluded from these decisions even if their exclusion is egalitarian and temporary. Disenfranchising children might nevertheless be acceptable to all qualified points of view if it is necessary to preserve a competent electorate. However, flatly excluding children is not necessary to achieve this end: a hybrid approach that enfranchises everyone above a certain age unconditionally and everyone below that age if they pass a competence test safeguards collective voter competence and reduces individual injustices that arise from excluding competent children. Standard Democrats must reject the hybrid approach because it is incompatible with their commitment to disenfranchising *all children*. But the only way they can reject it commits them to endorsing age-based disenfranchisements on both ends of the age spectrum, which is incompatible with their commitment to enfranchising *all adults*. This constitutes a dilemma for Standard Democrats: they have to give up their opposition either against unconditional disenfranchisement below a certain age or against unconditional enfranchisement above a certain age. Either option undermines their view.

4.2 Collective competence

Some authors argue that there is a moral difference between (a) not conceding a right to someone who never held this right and (b) withdrawing a right from someone who did hold it previously. The latter, the claim goes, thwarts a legally affirmed expectation and is therefore harder to justify than the former (cf. Chan and Clayton 2006, 554). There are reasons to reject this line of thought (cf. Lau 2012, 868), but let us accept it for the sake of argument. If correct, it might allow Standard Democrats to avoid the dilemma I raised for them in the last section. In that case, they still need to show that disenfranchising "children," however they may be defined, is necessary to keep collective voter competence above the level AEP requires. In this section, I challenge this claim.

The assumption that children are incompetent to vote is frequently made both explicitly (cf. Rehfeld 2011) and implicitly (cf. Clayton 2006). The first thing to note is that empirical evidence for this assumption is sparse. Since no democracy has ever allowed children to participate in elections, we can only speculate about what their voting behaviour would look like. The only tentative evidence available to us comes from mock elections. If we compare children's voting patterns in mock elections with those of other age groups in actual elections, it is by no means clear that children are less competent. In general, the distribution of votes follows the same pattern in both mock and real elections. To the degree that the former diverge from the latter, the most salient difference is that children show disproportionately strong support

for parties focusing on the protection of the environment and animal rights.[12] This fact alone hardly warrants the assumption that children are less competent. As Jörg Tremmel and James Wilhelm (2015, 141f.), who analyse the results of multiple German mock elections, point out, "there is already variation between the voting patterns of 20-30 year olds and 70-80 year olds – but nobody would deploy this line of reasoning to advocate for the exclusion of these age groups from the franchise." It would be arbitrary to "expel the younger fraction on the basis that [they] did not 'vote correctly.'" After all, old voters tend to be more conservative than the population average, but no one has yet proposed (at least not very seriously) to disenfranchise them for that reason. If age-specific political preferences do not justify the exclusion of old voters, they do not justify the exclusion of young ones either.

In response, Standard Democrats will rightly point out that the evidence we can obtain from mock elections is very limited. They represent the political views only of a very specific subset of children. First, only a small percentage participates in them. Second, among the participants, teenagers are likely to be highly overrepresented and young children highly underrepresented. Third, these elections primarily attract exceptionally well-informed and politically interested children. Standard Democrats might even concede that mock elections indicate that the current voting age of 18 years is too high. This does not undermine their view. They merely hold that there is *some* age below which everyone ought to be disenfranchised.

It is indeed plausible that, regardless of how moderate our standards for minimal voter competence are, there is an age group whose members fail to meet them (cf. Schrag 1975, 450). I am not talking about 16-year-olds, whose exclusion from elections does seem rather arbitrary: as many authors have pointed out, they do not differ from 18-year-olds in any relevant respect, for example regarding their degree of political knowledge or their cognitive maturity (cf. Hart and Atkins 2011; Merry and Schinkel 2016; Peto 2017). However, these authors also show that, below a certain age, children indeed lack knowledge of and interest in politics. Moreover, their cognitive apparatus is immature. For instance, the developmental status of young adolescents' brains makes them less capable of impulse control and more prone to seek immediate small gains at the expense of long-term benefits (cf. Reyna and Farley 2006). Perhaps the line should not be drawn at 18, 16, 14, or even 10 years. Certainly, however, there is a line to be drawn somewhere. Very young children do not meet

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[12] See the results of the last "U18 Election" in Germany, held every four years one week before the general election. Cf. https://www.u18.org/bundestagswahl-2017/wahlergebnisse/ [retrieved 17 August 2019].

the standards for minimal voter competence, however low we set the bar. So why not exclude them?[13]

I do not deny that many children, especially very young ones, do not possess whatever competence citizens may need to vote competently. The question, however, is whether this justifies disenfranchising any particular age group, as Standard Democrats claim. Recall that Standard Democracy's primary concern is with *collective* voter competence. *Individual* competences matter only insofar as collective competence derives from them. That is, to justify the disenfranchisement of a certain group, it is insufficient to show that its members fail, on average, to meet an individual competence requirement (cf. Goodin and Lau 2011). What needs to be shown is that the inclusion of this group undermines collective voter competence *to a sufficient degree*. According to AEP, the crucial benchmark is the better-than-random requirement. Excluding a certain group is justified only if including it would lower collective voter competence below that benchmark.

To assess whether the enfranchisement of a given group would have such an effect, we need a better understanding of what it means for an electorate to be "better than random" at making the right decisions. Several interpretations are possible. On the most demanding one, the electorate meets this requirement only if it chooses the best policy or candidate available in at least more than half the cases. An electoral outcome is "right" only if it maximises the common good. On the least demanding interpretation, the electorate meets this requirement if it avoids making disastrous choices in at least more than half of the cases. An electoral outcome is "right" as long as it produces a somewhat endurable state of affairs. Between these two extremes, there is a spectrum of differently demanding notions of what "being better than random at making the right decisions" means precisely.

For present purposes, the important point is that epistemic proceduralism must employ an account from the lower end of the spectrum. In fact, Estlund (2008, 163) comes close to opting for the least demanding interpretation when he merely requires electorates to prevent "primary bads," which include war, famine, genocide, and economic collapse. Why doesn't epistemic proceduralism ask for more? The answer is that demanding more comes at a price: the higher we raise the standard of

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[13] I suppose that it is for considerations roughly along these lines that even many authors who endorse enfranchising children stop short of rejecting the voting age. For instance, Lecce (2009, 137) holds that "there is not much to be said in favour of politically empowering young infants who are as likely to eat, rather than mark, a ballot"; Schrag (2004, 376) remarks that "it is clearly ludicrous to include very young children in the franchise"; and van Parijs (1999, 303) suggests that there are "obvious limits below which it is not reasonable to proceed."

correctness, the higher average individual voter competence has to be for the electorate as a whole to be better than random. We might then no longer be entitled to assume that every adult citizen has the required competence. Standard Democrats who employ AEP to justify the enfranchisement of all adults are therefore committed to a very moderate interpretation of what it means for an electorate to "be better than random at making the right decisions."

With this moderate interpretation of the collective competence requirement in place, it is implausible to expect the electorate to perform worse than random once children are included, regardless of what the voting age is. The problem facing Standard Democracy is this: the higher the voting age, the more individuals below that age will possess the moderate competence that EP requires; but the more competent individuals belong to the excluded group, the less plausible is the claim that enfranchising this group will undermine collective voter competence. In turn, the lower the voting age, the smaller the disenfranchised group; but the smaller this group, the less plausible, again, is the claim that enfranchising this group will undermine collective voter competence, even if all members of this group are indeed worse than random at making the right decisions. Either way, enfranchising everyone below the voting age would not lower collective voter competence so significantly that democratic procedures would no longer be better than random at yielding the right outcomes.

This is not to deny that the enfranchisement of children is likely to have a substantial impact on electoral results.[14] At the same time, we should not overestimate their impact. Turnout rates among children would presumably be low. Studies have repeatedly shown that political interest among children is low (Chan and Clayton 2006, 542), and they are less interested the younger they are. This is neither surprising nor deplorable: especially young children have other things on their minds than politics. But even all children would always exercise their right to vote, they would still merely "co-rule" (Goodin and Lau 2011). Democracy is based on the majority principle and children are a minority even in societies with high birth rates. Therefore, *even if* children make markedly different voting decisions than adults (which, as the discussion of mock elections indicated, does not seem to be the case) and *even if* these differences were due to their lack of competence, they are unlikely to cause major electoral damage. In conclusion, regardless how Standard Democrats spell out the age referred to in premise (6) of AEP, premise (3) looks implausible: it is not the case that anyone's disenfranchisement is necessary to preserve the collective voter competence that epistemic proceduralism requires.

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[14] As I argue in the next chapter, this is indeed one of the reasons *for* enfranchising them.

Standard Democrats could make a final attempt to save AEP by appealing to the present condition of the electorate. As we have seen, political ignorance is widespread even among the adult population. Now we might claim, like Stefan Olsson (2008, 63), that "[w]e know that democracy works. And it works despite the fact that a large number of the electorate is very low in competence." However, Standard Democrats could suggest that even without children, the electorate is already concerningly incompetent. Enfranchising even more incompetent citizens, even just a few, could cause a "competence meltdown" that makes the electorate drop below the better-than-random standard.

Absent empirical evidence, this counterargument is of course hard to assess. There is no obvious way to determine whether a given electorate is at risk of falling below the standard for collective competence. But assume that we have an electorate for which this is true. Even if this gives Standard Democrats a justification for not enfranchising children, they then face the problem that, in such a scenario, there is also a strong reason to disenfranchise some incompetent adults. Presumably, the imminent risk of "primary bads" warrants some precautionary measures, including competence tests that adult citizens would have to pass before being enfranchised. This point illustrates, once again, the general problem facing Standard Democrats: any argument for disenfranchising children is simultaneously an argument against unconditionally enfranchising all adults.

I thus conclude that AEP fails to provide the two-pronged justification Standard Democracy requires. It is implausible to argue that enfranchising children would undermine collective voter competence such that the electorate was no longer better than random at making the right political decisions. But Standard Democrats needed such an argument to show that disenfranchising children, unlike disenfranchising some adults, is acceptable to all qualified points of view. Without such an argument, they cannot justify denying the right to vote to citizens below a certain age.

5. Outlook

This chapter argued that Standard Democracy in untenable: it has to give up either its commitment to enfranchising all adults or to disenfranchising all children. If my arguments in the previous two chapters are correct, then Standard Democrats should maintain the former commitment: they should reject any epistocratic constraints on the right to vote. Therefore, they should give up the latter commitment and abandon the voting age.

What would a democracy without a voting age look like? I assume that it is at this stage – when envisioning an armada of infant voters crawling to the voting booths – where even those who accept my theoretical argument against Standard Democracy might be inclined to eschew its practical implications. Even if there is no solid theoretical justification for the voting age, one might argue, we have to accept it as a practical necessity. Abandoning the voting age would change democratic reality for the worse: political parties would unscrupulously fight for the votes of small children, promising them everything under the sun, exploiting their credulity. Parents would drag their unwilling children to the voting booth, instructing them where to mark the ballot. And even children who are not exposed to specious advertisements and pushy parents would have to concern themselves with politics way too early. Instead of scraping up their knees and play, they would have to study party programs and bear voter responsibilities.[15] In sum, this argument holds that abandoning the voting age would have harmful practical implications, not least for children themselves, because having the right to vote would make childhood unduly burdensome.

These concerns need to be taken seriously. To be sure, some might be less worrisome – for instance, in response to the concern that power-hungry politicians would fight for the votes of children in dishonest ways, Claudio López-Guerra (2014, 66) argues that "crazy promises such as free candy would never be made" because "most likely, sane adult voters would seriously punish at the polls anyone daring to make such proposals." However, this point does not discharge the worry completely. Especially in democracies with proportional representation and multi-party systems, some politicians could accept the ostracism of adult voters as long as they get enough children's votes to satisfy their desire for a seat in parliament, subsidies for their party, or media attention.[16] The role of parents is another point of concern: certainly, good role-models would refrain from pressuring ignorant children to vote. Quite the contrary, they would teach children that, although they have the *right* to vote, voting entails exercising power over others and should not be taken lightly. They would teach children that they should exercise this central democratic right only if they have carefully considered the issues they are voting on – and would not demand from children to make these considerations as long as, according to their developmental

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[15] For an argument against enfranchising children grounded in their interest in play, cf. Beckman (2009, 114–19). Merry and Schinkel (2016, 205f.) offer a critique.

[16] Moreover, it might turn out that the number of adults who can be lured with free candy is larger than expected.

stage, they are much more interested in playing and learning than in dealing with politics. But who guarantees us that real-world parents will live up to this standard?

In the next chapter, I will deal with the practical dimension of my argument for enfranchising children in detail. I propose an electoral scheme without a voting age and argue that such a scheme is not merely feasible but also instrumentally desirable. Of course, such an argument has to remain speculative to an extent: we simply lack experience with children participating in politics, so we cannot know for certain whether the optimistic or pessimistic scenarios are more realistic. The next chapter argues that there are good reasons to expect that, overall, the political enfranchisement of children will significantly improve democracy. I want to conclude this chapter, however, with a brief remark on the opposite possibility. Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that the pessimists are right: political competition would indeed degenerate into a funfair to deceive young voters, and many parents would indeed push their children to vote long before they should, sacrificing their child's interest in not being bothered with politics for the marginal advantage their preferred party or candidate gets from one additional vote. Would this make it permissible to disenfranchise children, even absent a solid theoretical justification for it? If so, it would be an embarrassment for adults. Their own incapacity or unwillingness to create a political environment in which children can grow into their right to vote undisturbedly is a particularly poor reason to deny children this right. If the case for disenfranchising children comes down to this argument, it does not bear witness to the maturity of adults.

The Case for Enfranchising the Young

1. Introduction

Western democracies are growing old, in two senses: for one thing, low birth rates in most Western countries cause the average age of their societies to rise. But democracy is also ageing itself: in post-war Europe and the United States, democratic forms of government have been around for so long now that only few citizens know from personal experience that they are not a matter of course. Both kinds of ageing raise distinct political problems. Ageing *societies* face, for instance, severe challenges regarding the long-term viability of current-income financing of public pension schemes and the load-bearing capacity of their health care systems. And ageing *democracies* seem to struggle, among other things, with what could be called a "wear-out effect": public enthusiasm for democracy seems to have cooled off in recent years. As discussed earlier (in chapter 5), citizens are increasingly expressing mistrust in core democratic institutions and are more open to authoritarian alternatives.

Borrowing a phrase from David Runciman (2018, 5), we might say that "Western democracy is going through a mid-life crisis." Substantial reforms are needed to prevent this mid-life crisis from turning into a full-fledged depression. At the same time, it is obvious that there is no panacea against the many ills afflicting contemporary liberal democracies. The crisis does not call for one overwhelming institutional reform but a package of different reforms at different levels of the political system.

In this chapter, I argue that one of these reforms should be an extension of the franchise to young citizens. More specifically, I suggest a voting scheme in which (1)

all citizens, regardless of age, can acquire the right to vote simply by registering for it and (2) everyone who does not register is automatically enfranchised at the age of 15.

Recall that there are two kinds of argument for extending the right to vote to children. One set of arguments holds that denying them this right is unjustified, at least given our commitment to the universal enfranchisement of adults (cf. Schrag 2004; Olsson 2008; Kiesewetter 2009; Lecce 2009; Cook 2013; López-Guerra 2014, chapter 3; Tremmel and Wilhelm 2015; Wiland 2018; Hinze 2019). This type of argument presents the case for enfranchising children as a *matter of principle* and is not concerned with the political implications this might yield. Another set of arguments holds that extending the right to vote to children – by either lowering the voting age or even abandoning it – would have *desirable consequences*. When fleshing out what these desirable consequences are, these latter arguments typically focus on intergenerational justice, which would arguably be better protected and promoted in democracies with a lower or no voting age (cf. van Parijs 1999; Peto 2017; Umbers 2020).

The previous chapter advanced an argument of the former kind. This chapter adds an argument of the latter kind. In contrast to most existing arguments in the literature, however, it does not exclusively focus on ameliorating young citizens' political condition vis-à-vis older cohorts. The *expected outcomes* of democratic procedures, and how well they accommodate the interests of young people, are only one part of the story. In addition, I focus on the *conditions* that need to hold for democratic procedures to be viable in the first place. The enfranchisement of the young, I argue, can have a long-term stabilizing effect on democracy in times of crisis and "deconsolidation" (Foa and Mounk 2016). In a nutshell, I claim that extending the right to vote to young people can stimulate their political engagement, raise their awareness of and interest in public affairs, and foster their allegiances to democratic norms and procedures. Enfranchising the young is thus not merely a way to harmonise the divergent political interests of different age groups in a democratic society; it is also a way to oppose the trend of eroding public support for democratic arrangements.

In section 2, I outline my proposal for Ageless Democracy, an electoral regime without a voting age. Section 3 draws on the epistemic approach to democracy to explain why the enfranchisement of young people can promote intergenerational justice.[1] Section 4 synthesises normative and empirical considerations to defend the

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[1] This section can be seen as a further development of the argument in the last chapter. There, I argued that an epistemic theory of democracy (Estlund's) does not give us a reason *against* enfranchising children. Here, I argue that an epistemic theory of democracy (Landemore's) gives a reason *for* enfranchising them.

key argument of this chapter, namely that the electoral inclusion of the young can contribute to the long-term consolidation of democracy. Section 5 summarises.

2. Ageless Democracy

The voting age serves two closely related purposes: first, it specifies the age below which all citizens are automatically and unconditionally disenfranchised. Second, it specifies the age at which all citizens are automatically enfranchised.[2] By "automatic" I mean that (dis)enfranchisement is the legal default in the respective age group. By "unconditional" I refer to the fact that the exclusion of specific individuals within the respective age group cannot be overridden by alternative considerations, for example regarding the interests, merits, or competence of the individuals in question.

The proposal I will defend in this chapter abandons the voting age. More specifically, it targets the first purpose of the voting age. I suggest that being below a certain age should not be sufficient for being disenfranchised. Along with a few other authors (Kiesewetter 2009; Cook 2013; Tremmel and Wilhelm 2015), I endorse a voting scheme in which citizens, regardless of age, can acquire the right to vote simply by registering as voters with the responsible authority in their country or municipality.[3] The registration would be voluntary and could roughly look like this: young people would have to make an appointment with the relevant authority, where they would have to prove their identity and present an informal letter in which they request to be enrolled for all upcoming elections. An administrator would inform them about the basic rules of the ballot both verbally and in writing. The applicants would then have to sign a form to confirm that they have received this information. Henceforth, they would be eligible[4] to vote.

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[2] I do not say "unconditionally" because, to repeat, many democratic countries disenfranchise at least some parts of the adult population. In some places, for example some states in the US, there is no automatic enfranchisement either: all citizens have to register for the vote.

[3] Recall the proposals offered by Grover (2011) and Munn (2012) I discussed in section 4.1 of chapter 6. Their proposals are similar but differ in one important respect: they suggest a substantive (although moderate) test of political knowledge rather than merely a registration process, and thus make it more demanding for young people to get the vote.

[4] In countries with compulsory voting systems, they would henceforth be obliged. If this seems too much, one could consider a model akin to the Argentinian system, where voting is voluntary for citizens aged 16-17, compulsory for citizens aged 18-69, and voluntary again for everyone from the age of 70. Other South American countries employ similar systems. Cf. "Legal Voting Age By

Note that this proposal leaves the second of the two purposes of the voting age unscathed: there would still be an age at or above which all citizens are enfranchised automatically. I suggest 15 as the age of automatic enfranchisement of all citizens who did not register before.[5] Thus, while this approach abandons a minimum age for voting, it maintains a maximum age where citizens are not eligible to vote (bracketing again any non-age-related reasons why citizens might be excluded).

In short, the voting scheme I want to argue for, which I henceforth refer to as *Ageless Democracy*, has two main features:

(1) A voluntary registration process to make the right to vote attainable for any citizen regardless of age; and

(2) automatic enfranchisement of all citizens who are not registered as voters by the age of 15

Ageless Democracy is designed to include children, especially adolescents, in the electorate. How many children will register as voters before they are enfranchised by age is of course an open question. The answer will also depend on where the age of automatic enfranchisement is set. The lower the age of automatic enfranchisement, the fewer children will acquire the right to vote by registration. Setting the age at 15 will presumably have the effect that only relatively few children would register prior to automatic enfranchisement. However, these speculations do not bear on the crucial point: implementing Ageless Democracy would result in a significant expansion of the electorate to young citizens.[6]

Before I turn to the question of why such an extension is desirable, let me add three preliminary points. First, it is worth noting that Ageless Democracy does not entail a right to vote from birth (cf. Peschel-Gutzeit 1999; Oebbecke 2004; Bernstein 2011). New-born citizens would still be disenfranchised by default. The crucial

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Country" (https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/legal-voting-age-by-country.html [retrieved 6 May 2020]).

[5] The reasons for suggesting 15 will emerge later on (especially in section 4.1). However, I do not provide a comprehensive defence of this particular element of my proposal; any age well below 18 is worthy of consideration. Suffice it to say that on this proposal, the choice of age of automatic enfranchisement is less consequential than it is in current electoral regimes.

[6] The extent of this expansion will of course hinge on the demographic structure of a given country. All OECD countries have seen a relative decline of their young population over the past 50 years (cf. https://data.oecd.org/pop/young-population.htm#indicator-chart [retrieved 11 February 2020]). Still, minors make up roughly 15-20 percent of these populations.

difference to the status quo is that reaching a certain age is not the only way by which citizens can attain the vote. One might ask, then, whether the registration process sketched above serves any purpose. Why not enfranchise everyone automatically right away? I regard it expedient to make citizens below the age of 15 subject to a registration requirement because it is plausible to expect that most people below that age do not have a strong interest in or substantial knowledge of politics. Accordingly, I share the view of the critics of children's voting rights that many and perhaps most children should not vote – children should have the freedom to learn, play, and develop, and in most cases, they will form an interest in politics quite late in this developmental process. Therefore, it is reasonable to have them disenfranchised by default. However, I disagree with the critics of children's voting rights that this plausible expectation warrants the flat and unconditional exclusion of everyone below the age in question. In some cases, children will be interested in and capable of participating in politics although they are still very young, and as I argued previously, there is no justification for denying them the right to participate. Thus, any individual who wishes to revoke their default status as disenfranchised citizen should be able to do so in a quick and uncomplicated way. At the same time, the registration process requires a minimum of personal initiative on part of the individual, so it helps to ensure that children who do register prior to automatic enfranchisement have an active interest in politics.[7]

Second, I am only concerned with the active right to vote here. In most democracies, citizens receive the active and the passive right to vote at once, so let me emphasize that I do not argue for abandoning age-restrictions on the passive right to vote. Insofar as the idea of school-aged children running for or even holding political office is problematic for multiple salient reasons, the argument presented here suggests that the active and the passive right to vote should be uncoupled. In any case, questions about the political inclusion of the young go beyond the issue of voting rights. To give their political judgements adequate weight in the political process, further steps might be necessary.[8] The proposal developed here neither entails nor opposes such further-reaching measures.

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[7] Cf. Cook (2013, 454) for a more detailed justification of voter self-registration as "a procedural test for electoral competence."

[8] There is a wide range of options. Some suggest reforming existing legislative institutions and to establish, for instance, youth quotas in parliament (cf. Bidadanure 2016) or to appoint ombudsmen for future generations (cf. Beckman and Uggla 2016). Others aim at building new institutions to give politics a more long-term perspective, such as establishing a permanent endowment of publicly held

Third, as I will emphasize throughout, I do not argue that adopting Ageless Democracy is sufficient for realizing intergenerational justice and/or (re)consolidating distressed democracies. I only argue that it takes us one step further in the pursuit of these goals. Given that a comprehensive package of reforms will be necessary to overcome the multidimensional crisis liberal democracy is arguably going through at present, one important aspect of evaluating my proposal's merits is its compatibility with further reforms of the electoral and political system. In particular, there is now a growing interest in alternative methods to select democratic representatives. A widely debated approach is to supplement or even replace elections with the random selection of legislators in permanent citizen assemblies (see e.g. Bouricius 2013; Guerrero 2014; MacKenzie 2016a; Landemore 2017b; Gastil and Wright 2019). At first glance, it might seem that the argument advanced here is incompatible with these sortition models. Indeed, if legislators are drawn at random rather than being elected, a case for extending the right to vote to the young is futile. However, the broader case for enfranchising young people is independent from the specific methods citizens employ to choose their representatives. Although I focus on elections, the more general point that emerges from my discussion is that the old and the young should have *equal opportunities* to participate in formal democratic procedures. This, I argue, will enhance intergenerational justice and help to foster young people's allegiances to and trust in these procedures. Whether these procedures are partly or exclusively elective or instead based on random sortition is an important but secondary issue. The crucial point is that whatever procedures we choose to be at the heart of our democratic systems, we should design them in a way that makes them open all, including the young.

3. Intergenerational Justice

There is a growing concern that Western democracies increasingly privilege the interests of older generations at the expense of the young. In the United States, for example, the federal government spends $7 on the elderly for every $1 spent on children (cf. Munn 2018, 612). Poverty among the elderly has declined by almost 70 percent in the past five decades to roughly 9 percent. Simultaneously, poverty among

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assets based on the Norwegian model (cf. Wilderquist 2016) or issuing climate bonds to compensate young and future generations for the depletion of fossil fuels (cf. Broome and Foley 2016).

children has increased to roughly 18 percent, the highest rate among all age groups.[9] To varying degrees, we can see similar patterns in other Western democracies (cf. Sloam 2014, 665).

The causes of these trends are undoubtedly manifold, but it is plausible that they can at least partially be explained by demographic shifts in these societies. Old voters make up an ever-larger portion of the electorate and thus become an increasingly powerful political interest group. In order to win elections, politicians need to appeal primarily to the old. It is therefore not surprising that old voters have clinched disproportionate shares of state subsidies in many democratic countries (cf. Peterson 1992, 152–59; van Parijs 1999, 295f.; Newacheck and Benjamin 2004, 143; Pantell and Shannon 2009, 139f.; Munn 2018, 612).

I do not suggest that prioritizing older generations can never be justified. However, if this prioritisation becomes structural, it undermines intergenerational justice.[10] For example, young people will inherit increasing amounts of public debt and face higher expenditures for private pensions, given that future cohorts of retirees will hardly be able to sustain themselves on public pensions alone. Obviously, this is a problem for young people, but it is also a problem for democracy more generally. To the extent that present voters support policies that severely restrict the political options available to future voters, democracy fails to be sustainable.

One step towards mitigating this problem is to make the political process more responsive to the interests of children. Broadly, there are two approaches. The first is to have their interests *represented by adults*, for example by giving parents "proxy votes" where parents receive an additional vote for every child they have and exercise it on their behalf until they reach the age of majority (Rutherford 1998; van Parijs 1999; Reimer 2004; Pantell and Shannon 2009; Wolf et al. 2015). However, this approach is problematic, even if we put aside the point that it contradicts the core democratic principle of *one person, one vote*. It is a common trope in democratic theory that attempting to represent the interests of a specific social group in the political

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[9] Cf. "Poverty Among Americans Aged 65 and Older" (https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R45791.pdf) and "Child Poverty in America 2017: National Analysis" (https://www.childrensdefense.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Child-Poverty-in-America-2017-National-Fact-Sheet.pdf) [retrieved 17 March 2020].

[10] More precisely, prioritizing older generations undermines what Tremmel (2009, 22) calls *temporal intergenerational justice*, which is concerned with distributive issues between overlapping generations. My argument that the political enfranchisement of the young can promote this kind of intergenerational justice leaves open the issue of *intertemporal intergenerational justice* (ibid.), which is concerned with distributive issues between the currently living and the not-yet born.

process, while still excluding the members of that group themselves, is futile (cf. Mill 2008 [1861]; Schrag 1975; Dahl 1989; Mansbridge 1999). Historical evidence abounds: aristocrats claimed to take care of the interests of workers, men claimed to take care of the interests of women, whites claimed to take care of the interests of blacks – in none of these cases were the interests of the respective social groups adequately represented by their self-proclaimed trustees.

Another approach is to allow young citizens to *participate themselves* in political procedures by giving them the vote. Young people have the most long-term interests of all social groups. If they get the opportunity to vote, their interests will have electoral weight, thereby incentivizing politicians and political parties to give young people's demands a place on their agenda. This can change democratic procedures, first, at the level of *electoral outcomes*. For instance (as mentioned in chapter 6), mock elections indicate that young people disproportionately support parties protecting the environment and animal rights.[11] If the franchise were extended to the young, parties committed to these policy goals would presumably win larger shares of the votes. Moreover, other parties that do not currently put a strong emphasis on these goals will be incentivised to realign their policy platform to make it more appealing to young voters. In short, the political enfranchisement of the young will shift electoral outcomes to the extent that it shifts the political preferences of the median voter.

In addition, the political enfranchisement of young people can change democratic procedures at the prior level of *deliberation*. Giving young people a seat at the table of the political community puts them into a position to raise their demands and concerns in ways that adults cannot easily discount. Even where adult citizens have good reasons to believe that some specific demands and concerns of the young are unjustified or unsubstantiated, the fact that they have full-blown democratic rights would require adults to address these concerns as seriously as they have to address the concerns of any other group of citizens. Adult citizens would owe young people a

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[11] Environmental protection has emerged as a key dimension of intergenerational justice. In every year since 1970, mankind has consumed more natural resources than the earth can regenerate, and the gap keeps growing (cf. https://www.overshootday.org/newsroom/past-earth-overshoot-days/ [retrieved 3 October 2019]). It is striking that democracies are at the forefront of global resource consumption: among the top-10 countries with the biggest ecological footprint are nine democracies (cf. https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/588224/umfrage/oekologischer-fussabdruck-der-laender-mit-den-hoechsten-werten/ [retrieved 3 October 2019]. In light of this correlation, many political theorists have argued that democracies are particularly prone to impose ecological and economic costs on future generations. This problem is now commonly called *democratic presentism* or *short-termism* (cf. Thompson 2010; MacKenzie 2016b).

justification for their diverging views, especially when adopted policies conflict with young people's preferences. To illustrate, consider the current *Fridays for Future* movement, and the way many adult citizens have responded to it. Regardless of what adults might think about the appropriateness and the feasibility of the activists' demands, the condescending way in which they have frequently treated the "greenhorns" at the demonstrations hardly exemplifies an ideal democratic deliberation. If they were potential voters, the public exchange of reasons would have to be much more attuned to the voices of young people, both where they succeed and where they fail to make compelling cases for their demands.

Against this line of argument, one might object that you need to have a clear understanding of your interests to effectively protect them in the political process, and young people often lack this understanding. However, as I argued in the last chapter, such an objection can get off the ground only if we employ an at least partially epistemic conception of democracy. I employed Estlund's epistemic proceduralism to make this point. Even then, I claimed, the objection fails to justify the electoral exclusion of children. Based on the considerations in this section, I now want to make the stronger claim that an epistemic conception of democracy – and more specifically Landemore's (2013, 2014) account of "democratic reason" – gives us a positive reason to *endorse* enfranchising children. Recall that Landemore argues that the "collective wisdom" of the electorate is not merely a function of individual competence levels, but more importantly of the *cognitive diversity* that obtains among the electorate. On this view, the electorate's capacity to produce decisions that advance the common good increases when it successfully employs diverse perspectives on and approaches to given political problems. An important reason for the epistemic purchase of cognitive diversity lies in the manifold and dynamic nature of these problems: although there are undoubtedly experts for any specific political domain, regarding for instance the economy, health policy, education, foreign policy, et cetera, nobody's expertise covers all domains in which political issues arise. Moreover, it is impossible to predict what specific kinds of knowledge will be pertinent to solve future social problems.

If this line of reasoning is correct, then young people can enhance the diversity of perspectives among the electorate. They can enrich the political decision-making process with an input that no other social group has to offer (cf. Lecce 2009; Peto 2017; Umbers 2020). Obviously, most children will not be competent in most political domains. With respect to some issues, however, for example environmental and educational policy, there is reason to think that they indeed have an epistemically valuable perspective on the subject matter which should at least inform political

decisions in these domains. Landemore suggests that scattered and partial knowledge in politically relevant domains suffices to warrant someone's full-fledged electoral inclusion. Thus, if her epistemic argument for democracy is on the right track, we should welcome the enfranchisement of the young for the very same epistemic reasons that justify the electoral inclusion of all adults. And if democracy must be justified in purely non-epistemic terms (and Landemore's epistemic argument is not on the right track, accordingly), the objection to the inclusion of children does not even get off the ground.

Thus far, we have seen that there is reason to expect that enfranchising young people will improve democratic procedures at the levels of deliberation and electoral outcomes, thereby promoting intergenerational justice. A more fundamental kind of potential impact, however, has often been neglected even by proponents of youth suffrage. As I shall now argue, Ageless Democracy can foster the *conditions* that need to hold for democratic procedures to be viable in the first place.

4. Democratic Engagement

In chapter 5, I discussed progressing levels of political disenchantment and "democratic deconsolidation," which raise concerns about the long-term viability of contemporary democracies. The aim of this section is to argue that the political enfranchisement of young people, by stimulating their political engagement, can contribute to the (re)consolidation of democracy. In section 4.1, I marshal empirical evidence to suggest that early enfranchisement can combat at least some sources of deconsolidation by raising young people's political interest,[12] abet long-term habits of political participation, and enhance their sense of political efficacy. The positive net effects of electoral inclusion hinge on several conditions, however. In particular, one key desideratum is that young people's participation is evenly balanced across different socioeconomic groups. Accordingly, section 4.2 assesses the potential of public schools as sources of balanced political participation.

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[12] Note the ambiguity of the term "political interest," which can refer both to someone's *interests at stake in politics* and to the fact that someone is *interested in political issues and events*. In contrast to the previous section, this section is about the latter kind of political interest.

4.1 The long-term dividends of early enfranchisement

Although most citizens still think that, *in theory*, democracy is the best form of government, the percentage that does so has been declining. Moreover, the decline in satisfaction with democracy as it exists *in practice* is even sharper (cf. Decker et al. 2016; Foa and Mounk 2017; Faus et al. 2019). It is striking that the current dissatisfaction with democracy is particularly pronounced among younger cohorts. Across Western countries, citizens born in the 1980s or later are less likely to consider it "essential" to live in a democracy, and more likely to regard democratic arrangements as a "bad way to run the country" than any other age group (cf. Foa and Mounk 2016). These figures are alarming signs for democrats, especially with respect to the prospects of democracy's future resilience against both internal and external challenges. In this section, I want to explain why there is reason to believe that adopting Ageless Democracy can contribute to narrowing the "quickly widening generational gap in political apathy" (Foa and Mounk 2016, 10). Enfranchising the young, I argue, can enhance their democratic engagement along three dimensions: it can stimulate their *interest in politics*, raise their *turnout rates*, and strengthen their *sense of political efficacy*.

4.1.1 Stimulating political interest

Political interest levels among the young are lower than among the average population and have been declining since the 1960s. Today, fewer young citizens regularly discuss political issues with their friends or family or think that it is important to keep up with politics than in previous decades.[13]

Young people's low levels of political interest are often taken as a sign of their political immaturity. However, this inference is problematic. Another possible explanation is that young citizens' disinterest explains why they appear to be politically immature. Someone who is excluded from political decisions lacks an important reason to develop an interest in and acquire knowledge about these decisions. Given that this is the situation citizens below the voting age are in, it is not surprising that they tend to perform poorly on standard assessments of political interest and knowledge. In other words, what is often interpreted as indicative of young people's political immaturity might simply reflect their exclusion from the political process.

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[13] Cf. "Most young lack interest in politics – official survey" (https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-26271935) [retrieved 15 April 2020]; cf. also Galston (2004).

There is empirical support for the conjecture that the political exclusion of the young at least partly explains their lack of interest. In a case study from Austria, the first European country to lower the voting age to 16 for federal elections in 2008, Eva Zeglovits and Martina Zandonella (2013) analyse how receiving the right to vote impacts the level of political interest among a given age group. The authors compare the political interest levels of the newly enfranchised 16- and 17-year-olds with the interest levels displayed by members of the same age group in earlier studies when 16- and 17-year-olds were not yet allowed to vote. They find that "both indicators of political interest, subjective political interest and frequency of following the news, show significantly higher interest among the enfranchised 16- and 17-year-olds in 2008 than among the non-enfranchised 16- and 17-year-olds in 2004" (2013, 1093). These results indicate that having an opportunity to participate in political decisions stimulates young people's willingness to engage with politics. Although the empirical evidence is limited, it does suggest that "youth suffrage encourages the development of political interest at an earlier age" (2013, 1098).

There is thus reason to believe that the opportunity to participate fosters the development of political interest. Political interest, in turn, fosters the acquisition of political knowledge. Giving young people the opportunity to vote can give teeth to otherwise tedious lessons on the democratic system and current affairs. Field experiments support the claim that children who get to apply the political knowledge they acquire at school in real-life contexts are more successful at incorporating this knowledge (cf. Westheimer and Kahne 2004, 255). They experience political education as more meaningful when they can embed it in hands-on activities (ibid., 249f.).

This points to a comparative advantage of Ageless Democracy over the status quo. The voting age creates a disincentive to develop an interest in politics. Instead of keeping young people at arms-length from decision-making power and giving them 18 long years to establish a self-image of someone who is politically uninterested, Ageless Democracy helps to create conditions which promote the development of their political interest and knowledge.

4.1.2 Raising turnout

According to the "developmental theory of voter turnout" (Plutzer 2002), whether citizens vote in the first few elections they are eligible for is often crucial for their subsequent participation patterns. Citizens have a "propensity (...) to settle into habits of voting and non-voting" (2002, 41). It is empirically well-documented that "the act of voting is self-reinforcing. When people abstain from voting, their subsequent

proclivity for voting declines; when they vote, they become more likely to vote again" (Gerber et al. 2003, 540).

These findings underscore the importance of encouraging newly enfranchised citizens to exercise their right to vote once they have received it. Worryingly, declines in turnout are most noticeable among young people (cf. Parvin 2018b, 34). Why is it so difficult to increase participation particularly among the young? Mark Franklin (2004) has argued that this is at least in part due to the specific stage in life in which citizens acquire the right to vote in most contemporary democracies. At present, citizens experience the first election they can participate in during their late teens or early twenties. At that age, most of them have just left school, moved away from their parents, and made their first steps into an independent life. However, few of them have already found their place in society, in many respects: few of them have found a permanent job, partner, or residence. In short, people at that age are all over the place. Their lack of strong social ties and their preoccupation with establishing themselves as independent members of society make it disproportionately unlikely that participating in abstract social activities like voting is a priority for them. It is thus somewhat ironic that by far the most democratic countries have set the voting age at 18. Franklin (2004, 213) even contends that "almost any other age from fifteen two twenty-five would be a better age for individuals to be first confronted with the need to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary for casting a vote."

These considerations support both key elements of Ageless Democracy. First, if young people decide themselves when to register as voters, the life period in which they start developing an interest in politics and the first election they are eligible for will be more likely to coincide. The chance of them having a "positive formative electoral experience" (Franklin 2004, 64) is highest when it is up to them when to vote for the first time. This supports the first element of Ageless Democracy, which is to allow children to choose themselves when to register for the vote. Second, to foster the conditions in which young people are likely to become habitual voters, they should receive the right to vote while still being in the relatively stable environments provided by their families and schools. Thus, even if they do not take the option to register for the vote, they should be enfranchised significantly earlier than they currently are.[14] This supports the second element of Ageless Democracy, which is to lower the age of automatic enfranchisement from 18 to 15.

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[14] Of course, one could also construct an argument for *raising* the voting age based on the same considerations. I do not assess this option because next to no one endorses it. For a rare exception, cf. the article "After   Yale,   Mizzou,   raise   the   voting   age   –   to   25"

Some might object that it is naïve to assume that this approach would increase the chance of young people having a "positive formative electoral experience." It will not be the child who makes the decision about when to vote for the first time, the objection goes, but the parents. Parents could urge their children to register as voters before they have an interest in being registered and use their influence on their offspring to make them vote for whatever their preferred electoral option is. If parents drag their unwilling children to the voting booth like they drag them to the dentist, children might in fact have the opposite of a positive formative electoral experience. In that case, the claim that there would be a positive impact on long-term turnout rates is much less plausible.

The risk of parental exploitation is indeed a weakness of Ageless Democracy. The relevant question, however, is not whether Ageless Democracy is flawless but whether it improves upon the status quo. Note that parents bear a great deal of responsibility for their children in numerous respects. We normally do not feel uncomfortable with their parental prerogative although this entails the possibility of some parents sometimes making distinctively bad decisions for their children. Making children register for the vote before they express an interest in voting and instructing them to vote in a particular way would certainly amount to bad parenting.[15] Still, this is far from establishing that parents must be legally prevented from doing so. If we generally regard parents as competent to manage the challenges of upbringing, we should also assume they are reasonable enough not to trade in the wellbeing of their child for the minuscule advantage their preferred candidate or policy would receive from one additional vote. If this expectation is warranted, then this particular weakness of my proposal will not cause much harm. The current practice of flatly excluding young people from political decisions, just to enfranchise them at arguably the least suitable point of their lives, presumably fares much worse in an overall evaluation, especially regarding its long-term impact on turnout rates.

(https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2015/11/11/raise-voting-age-25-yale-missouri-protests-political-debate-column/75577468/ [retrieved 10 December 2019]).

[15] A critic might add that, if bad parents are particularly likely to engage in this practice, Ageless Democracy multiplies the electoral impact of bad parents, of all people. I concede this point but want to make two remarks in response: first, it is at least not obvious that bad parents are also bad voters. Second, even if they are, I take it to be implausible that this disadvantage will outweigh the benefits of Ageless Democracy (see below). On the role of parents in a democracy that allowed children to vote, see also Olsson (2008, 70ff.).

4.1.3 Enhancing subjective political efficacy

Recall the concept of *political efficacy*, which can be broadly defined as "the feeling that individual political participation does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process (...). It is the feeling that political and social change is possible, and that the individual citizen can play a part in bringing about this change" (Campbell et al. 1954, 187). On this account, political efficacy is a subjective notion. It is not a measure of actual system responsiveness but of the individual citizens' sense of having a meaningful role to play in the political process. For a flourishing democracy, it is crucial that sufficiently many citizens feel politically efficacious. Citizens who feel a lack of political efficacy are more prone to distrust the democratic system, which increases the chance of them passively or actively endorsing actions that subvert the system itself (cf. Balch 1974).

There is a mutually reinforcing connection between subjective political efficacy and participation. Citizens who participate in political procedures are more likely to think that their participation matters, which in turn increases the chance that they will participate in the future. The same dynamic works in the opposite direction: citizens who abstain from participating are more inclined to think that the political process is unresponsive to them, which in turn decreases the chance that they will participate in the future (cf. Finkel 1985, 894). Participation and abstention have the capacity to alter citizens "broad psychological orientations" towards politics (Gerber et al. 2003, 548): the act of voting itself can prompt feelings of civic obligation in citizens, which then serve as the foundation for future turnout (ibid.). Thus, the value of voting is neither reducible to the mere input citizens give to the electoral outcome nor to its "expressive" function of cherishing social identities and group attachments. Instead, the mere acts of going to the polling station, entering the voting booth and casting a ballot are themselves valuable insofar as they help to establish a psychological tie between the individual and the abstract process in which she partakes. Political participation, in other words, has positive feedback effects on both the system and the voter.

Enabling young people to participate in political decisions makes these positive feedback effects accessible to them. If they get to participate early on in life, the psychological mechanisms just described work for the benefit of entrenching attachments to democratic procedures. A system that at least creates options for young people's political participation signals to them that they have a role to play in politics and that the system is responsive to their views. Such a system puts a certain amount of trust into young people, thereby increasing the chance that they will develop trust in the system. This kind of trust is a key component of citizens' sense of political

efficacy. Accordingly, building inroads for young people into politics can foster the conditions under which their subjective political efficacy can thrive.

If this argument is correct, the enfranchisement of the young can pay long-term dividends. Presumably, citizens who establish a sense of political efficacy at an early stage of their lives will be less susceptible to narratives suggesting that the whole political system is rigged against "the people." Indeed, as noted in chapter 5, the most reliable predictor of an individual's support for populism today is a sense of lack of political efficacy (cf. Spruyt et al. 2016). The more citizens affirm the venues of political participation in democracy as meaningful and think that it makes a difference whether and how they vote, the lower the demand for populist tropes. Obviously, merely giving young people a say in elections will not immunise them against populist or even anti-democratic ideologies, especially when elections do not offer real choices. So, let me emphasize again that I do not consider the political enfranchisement of the young a panacea to bring about democratic (re)consolidation. For the reasons presented in this section, however, I do expect early enfranchisements to increase the levels of young people's political interest, turnout, and subjective political efficacy, and thus to have a positive net effect on the consolidation of democratic systems.

4.2 Democratic education and the role of public schools

One could object that, even if adopting Ageless Democracy will mitigate one driver of democratic deconsolidation – the *generational gap* in political apathy – it might at the same time fuel a different driver of democratic deconsolidation, namely the *socioeconomic gap* in political apathy. Political participation levels are not even across different socioeconomic groups. Affluent citizens are significantly more likely to participate in democratic politics than members of low-income groups. This applies to both formal and informal modes of political participation. It bears mentioning that this is not just an inevitable circumstance of real-world democracy: until roughly the 1980s, there was no significant correlation between citizens' income situation and participation rates (cf. Schäfer 2015, 91). Since then, however, both the income distribution and patterns of political participation have become increasingly unequal. Given the repercussions of participating in and abstaining from politics discussed above, this trend is a serious problem for democracy. Low turnout rates with a strong socioeconomic bias indicate that system trust among a substantial portion of the citizenry is eroding.

Adopting my proposal could reinforce socioeconomic imbalances in voter turnout. Given how political engagement is now distributed across society, children from

affluent social backgrounds have a substantially higher chance of growing up in an environment that stimulates their political interest. It is thus plausible to expect that it will be primarily children from well-off families who will register for the vote before the age of automatic enfranchisement. Thus, one might object against Ageless Democracy that even if it mitigates the gap in political influence among different age groups, this advantage might be offset by its unintended consequence of exacerbating the gap in political influence among different socioeconomic groups.

Indeed, the enfranchisement of the young will have a long-term positive impact on democratic consolidation only if young people from all social backgrounds will take the opportunity to participate in politics. We therefore need to ask how Ageless Democracy can be implemented such that it stimulates socially balanced participation. This point brings to the fore broader issues in the justice of upbringing and education. What I want to focus on for the remainder of this section is the role of public schools in the political education of young people. In theory, public schools are an ideally suited institution to provide all children, irrespective of their background, with the abilities they need to participate in politics competently and effectively. They are designed to reach everyone; their staff is skilled to teach children the knowledge that is deemed essential on a given subject matter; and they have the capacity, through standardised curricula and assessments, to ensure that all children acquire the respective knowledge to a sufficient degree. Public schools are thus in the position to at least mitigate inevitable differences in political education and resources that stem from children's different social backgrounds.

In practice, however, the public-school systems in many Western democracies are poorly equipped to be key providers of political education for everyone.[16] There are several reasons for this. First, political education is often given a low priority in the curriculum. Schools tend to focus on "core" subjects for which there is some kind of general assessment within their municipalities or states. Typically, politics is not part of this core. In many cases, students do not have classes specifically devoted to political education at all.[17] Rather, politics is dispersed across several other classes, for

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[16] To be sure, the differences among public-school systems are significant not merely between different countries but also within (especially federalist) countries. The studies I will refer to mostly relate to the US and the German school system. The degree to which the conclusions I draw are applicable to other countries depends on the degree to which their school systems are comparable to these.

[17] Sometimes, it takes students' own initiative to raise public awareness to this problem: in 2018, a group of 17-year-old students from Rhode Island who never had the chance to take a class in government, civics or economics at their school sued the state for failing to equip "all of its students with the skills to 'function productively as civic participants' capable of voting, serving on a jury, and

example on history or geography, which effectively means that these classes are nei-
ther one thing nor the other. The status that political education is given in actual
school curricula frequently fails to match up with the emphasis that political actors
put on it (cf. Achour 2018).

Second, in increasingly polarised societies, teachers can be less willing to address
potentially controversial political topics in the classroom. Avoiding political issues
entirely is the safest way for teachers to evade utterances that could spur long-lasting
controversies with the student body, colleagues, or parents.[18] Obviously, this precau-
tionary measure prevents children from discussing and learning about these con-
tested issues in the classroom.

The crucial reason why public schools often fail to establish equality in political
education, however, is the deep inequality manifest in the school system itself. Alt-
hough they are supposed to be inclusive and bring together children from all across
society, in reality, public schools tend to be highly segregated institutions. The di-
vides run along the familiar lines of wealth and ethnicity (cf. Anderson 2007, 600f.;
Merry 2018, 8). This is problematic in its own right. To make things worse, the qual-
ity of political education children receive often depends on where they go to school.
A recent German study on this issue finds a severe "elitist bias in political education":
schools that are pre-dominantly attended by students from affluent social back-
grounds provide both more and better political education than schools primarily at-
tended by disadvantaged groups (Achour and Wagner 2019). The authors conclude
that "the school system does not provide socially and culturally deprived students
with an equal access to political education" (my translation). The upshot is that, at
present, public schools often entrench rather than offset existing differences in
young citizens' opportunities to become politically competent and to participate in
politics.

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understanding the nation's political and economic life." Cf. "Are Civics Lessons a Constitutional
Right? This Student is Suing for Them" (https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/28/us/civics-rhode-
island-schools.html [retrieved 19 October 2019]).

[18] In Germany, the party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) created an online portal on which stu-
dents can "report" teachers who have allegedly violated standards of political neutrality in the class-
room. There were several instances in which teachers became victims of mobbing and anonymous
threats because they were reported for making statements "against the AfD" during their lessons. Cf.
"Verpetz deine Lehrer" (https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/schule/2018-10/afd-lehrerpranger-url-
afd-lehrerpranger-online-denunziation-eltern-schueler [retrieved 19 October 2019]).

This state of affairs is not inescapable. Field experiments show that political education not only has the potential to enhance students' political competence levels;[19] they also have the potential "to compensate for gaps in civic education that may emerge from socioeconomic differences across families" (Bischoff 2016, 95; cf. also Meirick and Wackman 2004; Schwarzer and Zeglovits 2013). Outright denials of the public-school system's capacity to educate students for democratic citizenship (cf. Murphy 2007; Merry 2018) are therefore unwarranted. Rather, the current state of affairs is a reversable consequence of insufficient political efforts to strengthen the public school system in general and political education in particular.

To an extent, this is simply a matter of resources. For instance, both the United States' and Germany's public expenditures on education are below the OECD average – for an at least partial explanation of this negligence, see the earlier discussion on how democracies tend to prioritize the elderly.[20] But it would be misleading to suggest that all would be well if only more money were pumped into the system. To combat inequalities *within* the public-school system, structural change is needed. In particular, the student body at public schools should break through rather than mirror the social segregations characteristic of the society at large.

This is a tall order, and I cannot treat the issue adequately here. I want to underscore, however, that several approaches to tackle this issue are available. For instance, Elizabeth Anderson (2007, 619) has suggested a system in which children can "cross municipal lines to be admitted to any public school in which their group is underrepresented (...) provided that their parents or guardians pay the school the same tax rate that prevails in the community where the school is located." This would ensure that wealthy communities cannot insulate the public goods that their members have access to in virtue of the community's disproportionately large tax base. Another idea is to equate tax rates and public expenditure on school financing: on this approach, communities would first decide how much they are willing to tax themselves for the public school system; they would then be entitled to draw funds from a common tax base, based on the rate they have charged themselves with. This would ensure that "equal tax rates (...) provide equal spendable dollars" (cf. Coons et al. 1970, 34). Obviously, these are only rough sketches whose applicability also depends

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[19] Cf. "Youth Who Learned about Voting in High School More Likely to Become Informed and Engaged Voters" (https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/youth-who-learned-about-voting-high-school-more-likely-become-informed-and-engaged [retrieved 9 September 2020]).

[20] As Levinson (2011, 127) strikingly remarks, "adults' democratically legitimate control over education *within* democracy (...) may well undercut children's legitimate claims to receiving an education that equips them *for* democracy."

on the existing funding model of the respective public-school sector. They indicate, however, that a public-school system that distributes the benefits of a solid (political) education more equitably is mainly a matter of political volition.

These considerations suggest that the political enfranchisement of the young should only be one (although central) element in a wide-ranging reform package designed to empower young citizens. A practical example is Austria, where the decision to lower the voting age in 2008 was accompanied "with a bundle of measures including a chance [sic] in school curricula to strengthen civic education; and awareness-raising campaigns and projects that reached a large proportion of young people via schools" (Schwarzer and Zeglovits 2013, 73). Public schools were assigned a key role in preparing young people for their first election, and simultaneously they were given the resources to fulfil this role. Obviously, however, my proposal goes significantly further than the Austrian approach, and the concomitant reforms suggested in this section would certainly invoke substantive costs. Still, the case for enfranchising the young I outlined in this chapter provides some reason to believe that this investment will pay off.

5. Summary

Within just a few years, the claim that liberal democracy is going through an existential crisis has shifted from a fringe view to a commonplace one. At the very end of their book *How Democracies Die*, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2018, 231) write:

> "Previous generations of Europeans and Americans made extraordinary sacrifices to defend our democratic institutions against powerful external threats. Our generation, which grew up taking democracy for granted, now faces a different task: We must prevent it from dying from within."

The alarming tone of these words emphasizes that the present crisis cannot be solved by sitting it out. Moments like these not only challenge our political determination but also our imagination: finding solutions to the many ills afflicting democracy today might require us to go beyond the traditional repertoire of political reforms and – to use another commonplace – to think outside the box.

The political disenfranchisement of the young has thus far been a robust plank of the box within which our deliberations about democratic reform have taken place. In this chapter, I argued that we should reconsider this deeply entrenched feature of democracy. I gave two reasons for this: first, democracies that enfranchise the young will be better equipped to advance intergenerational justice. Second, by stimulating political engagement among young cohorts, these democracies will also have better prospects of closing the generational gap in political participation, and thus to combat one cause of democratic deconsolidation.

I thus outlined a proposal for electoral reform, on which young people (1) can acquire the right to vote through a voluntary registration process and (2) will otherwise be enfranchised at the age of 15. However, merely adopting this proposal will not suffice to secure the instrumental benefits that the political enfranchisement of the young can yield. These benefits will materialise only if it is combined with a substantive social effort to provide young people, irrespective of their social background, with the democratic education they need to seize the opportunity to participate in politics. In that respect, public schools play a key role. In theory, public schools are intended to establish an equal distribution of democratic education. In practice, they often fall short of this goal. The failure of the public-school system to create equal opportunities for political participation does not undermine the case for Ageless Democracy, however. Rather, it shows that its implementation would have to be accompanied by a structural investment in the public-school system's capacity to prepare children for their role as democratic citizens. While no doubt costly, this would reflect a strategic decision to safeguard the democracy of the future by investing in the people who will, for better or worse, determine the future of democracy.

Age, Knowledge, and the Right to Vote

To wrap up, I will first give a short summary of my main arguments. Second, I briefly comment on the broader context of these arguments and highlight some general questions that my discussion hopefully sheds light on. A third aim is to point out some important questions I have not addressed, and to indicate how the issues discussed here can be developed further.

The right to vote is a central political right. The general principle of democracy, in the words of Jeremy Waldron (2012, 188), is that "any adult citizen, however lowly, (…) is to be enfranchised as a voter in a system that allows the mass of voters to choose their rulers and determine directly or indirectly which laws are enacted and which policies are followed." There are many reasons to endorse this principle. For instance, one could argue that all adult citizens ought to have the right to vote because of their *equal moral standing*, that is, as a matter of equal respect for their judgements and equal consideration of their interests.[1] Or one could argue for it on basis of the value of *autonomy*; on this view, the right to vote is indispensable because it enables autonomous individuals to self-legislate (cf. Rostbøll 2015; Wilson 2019). Another option is to defend it for more pragmatic reasons and to hold that adopting a political system that gives all citizens an equal say is the best we can do to *avoid the threat of domination*, that is, a state of affairs where some social groups systematically advance their interests at the expense of certain others (cf. Shapiro 2016). Yet another option is to argue, as epistemic democrats do, that giving all citizens an equal say has

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[1] Waldron attributes this view to "most philosophers" (2012, 192).

epistemic value: democratic procedures are our best guess to arrive at optimal solutions to given political problems (cf. Landemore 2013), or at least the best among those that meet some further conditions on procedural legitimacy (cf. Estlund 2008).

All of these approaches, or some combination of them (they are not mutually exclusive), might successfully justify giving all adult citizens an equal right to vote. However, many democratic theorists also think that we can justify giving the right to vote *only* to adult citizens. On the view I called Standard Democracy, we may or even ought to withhold the right to vote from people below a certain age. Standard Democracy is well-established: there has never been a time and place where all citizens, irrespective of their age, could participate in formal democratic procedures. All democracies have always adopted a voting age.

In this work, I argued against this common view. I defended Ageless Democracy, a voting scheme with no blanket exclusions. The idea of a democracy in which even infants can vote strikes many as absurd – including some democratic theorists who argue for a significantly lower voting age – and the fact that I defended it here might merely confirm Shaprio's sober conclusion that "there is no proposition that some political philosopher somewhere will not defend" (2016, 231). I tried to show, though, that the deeply entrenched commitment to the voting age is indeed unwarranted, on the level of both theory and practice.

In theory, the voting age is indefensible. I suggested that among the available justifications for universal adult suffrage, the epistemic approach is the most promising candidate to simultaneously justify the disenfranchisement of children. Epistemic democracy has often been charged with prompting the epistocratic challenge, and some reject epistemic democracy for that reason (cf. Urbinati 2014, chapter 2).[2] As I tried to show, however, even the most compelling epistocratic proposal can be refuted. We can justify equal voting rights for all adult citizens within an epistemic approach to democracy. Furthermore, we can arguably justify the disenfranchisement of children within this approach: the electoral exclusion of citizens below a certain age is warranted if it is necessary for democratic procedures to meet a certain epistemic standard. I argued, however, that this is not the case. Regardless of how the voting age is defined, it is implausible to hold that it is necessary to preserve the epistemic reliability of democratic procedures. For that reason, the formal inequality instantiated by the voting age cannot be justified. Epistemic considerations do not warrant the disenfranchisement of children. If epistemic considerations are indeed the

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[2] More precisely, this charge only applies to the veritistic version of epistemic democracy (recall the distinction between veritistic, conciliatory, and pragmatist epistemic democracy in chapter 1).

most promising approach to justify voting rights for *all and only* adults, then Standard Democracy is theoretically untenable. Standard Democrats cannot maintain both of their core commitments simultaneously. Given that they ought to maintain their anti-epistocratic commitment to the equal enfranchisement of all adults, they must therefore abandon their commitment to the voting age.

In practice, the voting age is undesirable. For one thing, there is reason to believe that a voting scheme that gives all citizens the opportunity to vote would be better equipped to promote intergenerational justice. If young people could vote, the outcomes of democratic procedures would plausibly be less prone to advance the interests of older generations at the expense of the young. Far from justifying their exclusion, concerns about the epistemic merits of democracy thus suggest *extending* the right to vote to young people. Moreover, Ageless Democracy would be better equipped to vindicate the conditions of democratic procedures in the long run. Giving young people the opportunity to vote increases the chance that they will accept democratic procedures as the only legitimate way to settle important political questions. It also increases the chance that they will be better informed about these questions.

Part of the argument for Ageless Democracy is thus that it promotes epistocratic ends without employing epistocratic means. Epistocrats are concerned about the prevalence of political ignorance among the electorate. If there is anything that speaks in favour of adopting Epistocratic Democracy, it is its alleged capacity to encourage more citizens to meet the epistemic demands of democratic government. I argued, however, that the specific means epistocrats want to use to motivate citizens to acquire political knowledge – a plural voting scheme that rewards the well-informed with an additional vote – is deeply problematic, for at least two reasons. First, it violates a revised version of Estlund's qualified acceptability requirement. The formal inequality it incurs does not improve the epistemic reliability of democratic procedures beyond reasonable doubt. Second, implementing Epistocratic Democracy is a particularly counterproductive approach in times when citizens are increasingly sceptical whether democratic procedures deliver outcomes that serve the interests of the majority. In contrast, implementing Ageless Democracy can make an (albeit small) contribution to improving the level of political knowledge among the electorate in the long run while incurring less formal inequality than Standard Democracy (and a fortiori Epistocratic Democracy). And while Epistocratic Democracy is likely to increase the demand for the populist trope that the whole political system is rigged against "the people," Ageless Democracy can arguably reduce this threat by increasing young people's sense of political efficacy. Thus, even if we accept some of

the epistocratic desiderata and seek to reform Standard Democracy for that reason, adopting Ageless Democracy turns out to be a better approach than adopting Epistocratic Democracy.

On a more abstract level, my aim has been to show that combining the debate about epistocracy with the debate about youth suffrage allows us to rethink the relation between age, knowledge, and the right to vote in a productive way. In particular, it brings to the fore two important questions: first, what conditions, if any, do citizens have to meet to be *entitled to vote*? Second, what conditions, if any, do they have to meet to *vote well*?

In response to the first question, epistocrats argue that citizens have to meet some standard of political knowledge, and since many citizens fail to meet this standard, their right to vote should be discounted or even revoked. Standard Democrats challenge this view and claim that citizens do not have to meet any knowledge requirements to be entitled to vote, or that they do meet them. What tends to be overlooked, however, is that this reply is self-undermining for Standard Democracy, which is itself a weak form of epistocracy. Recall that contemporary epistocrats do not seek to establish the rule of the most knowledgeable citizens. Rather, they seek to reduce the political impact of the least knowledgeable ones. Standard Democracy, by flatly disenfranchising everyone below a certain age, is based on the very same idea. Standard Democrats' strong and sometimes dismissive rejections of epistocracy are therefore somewhat hypocritical or at least oblivious. It is not clear whether Standard Democracy, especially if it disenfranchises everyone below an age as high as 18, is less epistocratic than, for instance, an ageless version of Epistocratic Democracy where *all* citizens can vote and those who meet some standard of political knowledge receive an extra vote. If we are genuinely concerned with citizens being competent enough to vote, we must ask whether adopting a voting age is the appropriate approach to ensure that only competent citizens are eligible to vote. In turn, if we think that citizens do not need to possess any specific competence to be voters, or that there is no such thing as individual political competence, we must ask what the purpose of the voting age is in the first place. The merit of epistocrats, I think, is that they stimulate our thinking about these issues. Ironically, the most important upshot of the considerations prompted by the epistocratic challenge to Standard Democracy is that voting rights should be extended rather than constrained.

The second question – what conditions, if any, do citizens have to meet to vote well? – is distinct from the first. Even if citizens do not have to meet any competence conditions to be *entitled to vote*, this does not imply that they do not have to meet any competence conditions to *vote well*. "Voting well" can be understood in an

objective sense (citizens vote well if they vote for whatever option is most conducive to the common good) or in a subjective sense (citizens vote well if they vote for whatever option promotes their interests). Either way, citizens must have a certain level of political knowledge to vote well. Democracy is an epistemically demanding form of government, and empirical studies repeatedly indicate that many adult citizens do not meet the conditions to vote well. It is plausible that this applies even more so to children. It is therefore important to note that the claim that all citizens *should have the right to vote* does not imply the claim that *all citizens should vote* in elections. In this work, I argued for the former claim but not for the latter. I did not pursue the questions of whether citizens have a duty to vote, whether they have a duty to vote only if they have informed themselves about politics, or whether they have a duty to both inform themselves about politics *and* to vote. Likewise, I did not pursue the question of whether citizens have a duty to refrain from voting if they haven't informed themselves. Another issue is whether these questions can be answered generally, or whether they have different answers for different age groups. For instance, it seems implausible to hold that children have a duty to inform themselves about politics, depending on their developmental stage. However, if citizens have a duty to abstain from voting unless they are competent to vote well, and if citizens can vote well only if they have informed themselves, then citizens who have not informed themselves should not vote at all. This will apply to many or even most children. Thus, the view I defended is entirely compatible with the view that most children should not vote.

Giving children the right to vote would impose some new responsibilities on their parents or guardians. As long as children do not express an interest in politics themselves, parents or guardians should not make them vote. Good democratic educators will of course try to *stimulate* this interest in children of an appropriate age, but they will not force children to participate in formal political procedures merely because they have a right to participate. It is not deplorable that most children will not meet the conditions to vote well. To the contrary, if some five-year olds did meet these conditions, we should probably worry about them having a happy childhood. In short, if parents and guardians act responsibly, Ageless Democracy would ideally bring about a state of affairs in which most children do not vote although they have the right to do so. This is not contradictory. Being eligible to vote and being competent to vote well does not require citizens to meet the same set of conditions. The latter is more demanding than the former. If citizens should vote only if they are competent to vote well – which, again, is a proposition I argued neither for nor against – then most children (and many adults) should abstain.

There is one final point I want to highlight. If most children do not vote despite having the right to, then adopting Ageless Democracy might not be sufficient to amplify children's voices in politics. It will not fully balance the political participation of different age groups; it will not give children representatives in the legislature; and it will not undo already existing disadvantages for the young that stem from the fact that many democratic countries have given disproportionate consideration to the interests of the elderly in the past. In short, rejuvenating democracy will require more than merely giving children the right to vote. To be sure, children are not the only group whose views are underrepresented in the political process. Still, representing them adequately is particularly challenging because they cannot speak up for themselves in the way that other marginalised groups can. It is thus important that Ageless Democracy can and should be combined with several other institutional reforms that specifically aim at this problem. A lot more work needs to be done to determine how Ageless Democracy needs to be fleshed out to give young people the leverage they need to impact the democratic process. For now, suffice it to say that the extension of the franchise does not guarantee the political inclusion of the young. It is a starting point, not the end.

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