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Betting Democracy on Epistemology

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Abstract

This paper examines two major challenges to epistemic theories of democracy: the "authority dilemma" and the "epistemic gamble." The first is a conceptual challenge, suggesting that epistemic democracy is inherently self-undermining. The second is a normative challenge, asserting that the case for democracy should not rely on precarious epistemic grounds. I argue that both challenges fail, demonstrating that epistemic theories of democracy withstand these two prominent objections.

Keywords: Political epistemology; epistemic democracy; public ignorance; authority dilemma; deliberative democracy

> The democratic process is a gamble on the possibilities that a people, in acting autonomously, will learn how to act rightly.
>
> —Robert Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*

1. Introduction

What does democracy have to do with epistemology? According to many thinkers, not much (Rawls 1993; Waldron 1999; Posner 2003; Pettit 2012; Urbinati 2014). A democracy aspires to be a community of free and equal citizens, with procedures designed to embody moral values such as fairness, equality, and respect. For instance, Thomas Christiano argues that democracy is intrinsically valuable because it treats people as equals (Christiano 2008). Specifically, it provides citizens with an equal opportunity to influence political decisions and shape their own political lives (Griffin 2003; Kolodny 2014; Viehoff 2014; Lafont 2020). Others assert that democracy is valuable because it prevents domination, upholds the collective autonomy of its citizens, or fosters an inclusive and free society (Dahl 1989; Pettit 2012; Young 2002). These perspectives all express the legitimacy, authority, or value of democracy in *non-epistemic* terms.

In recent years, a growing number of thinkers have begun advocating for democracy on *epistemic* grounds (Cohen 1986; Anderson 2006; Estlund 2008; Talisse 2009; Landemore 2012; Goodin and Spiekermann 2018). This shift has been referred to as the

"epistemic turn" in democratic theory (Jörke 2010; Palumbo 2012; Landemore 2017). These epistemic theorists argue that politics is not only about following procedures that treat citizens as free and equal but also, and perhaps primarily, about ensuring that these procedures lead to informed and wise decisions that benefit society. According to "epistemic democrats," democratic processes like deliberation and voting are valuable because of their epistemic advantages. They contend that democracy can guide us to the right decisions by aggregating votes, fostering inclusive deliberation, or both.

These epistemic theories are not without criticism. Some argue that the epistemic benefits of democracy are overstated and that democratic processes routinely lead to irrational or suboptimal decisions (Caplan 2007; Brennan 2016; Somin 2016). For instance, voters may lack the necessary knowledge to make informed decisions on complex issues, or they may be swayed by populist rhetoric or misinformation. Furthermore, some critics argue that emphasizing epistemic considerations can lead to an instrumentalization of democratic values. If the value of democracy reduces to its epistemic outputs, then other important democratic principles – such as equality, autonomy, and respect for individual rights – may be sacrificed in the pursuit of epistemic efficiency.

In this paper, I explore two popular challenges to epistemic theories of democracy. In §2, I provide a more detailed explanation of epistemic democracy, focusing on its descriptive and normative commitments. This provides a foundation for the subsequent analysis of epistemic theories. In §3, I present the first challenge to epistemic accounts of democracy, *the authority dilemma*. This challenge questions the coherence of epistemic democracy, suggesting that democratic decision procedures cannot be coherently justified on epistemic grounds. In §4, I attempt to answer this challenge. In §5, I consider a second challenge against epistemic democracy, which I call *the epistemic gamble*. According to this challenge, it is objectionable to base the case for democracy on contingent and potentially dubious empirical assumptions about its epistemic merits. In §6, I explain why this challenge fails.

2. Epistemic theories of democracy

Historically, the epistemic value of democracy has been defended most notably by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Stuart Mill, and John Dewey (Rousseau 1762; Mill 1859; Dewey 1927). Contemporary advocates of epistemic democracy include Elizabeth Anderson, David Estlund, Hélène Landemore, Robert Goodin, and Kai Spiekermann, among others (Cohen 1986; Nino 1996; Anderson 2006; Estlund 2008; Talisse 2009; Landemore 2012; Goodin and Spiekermann 2018; Benson 2024). While these thinkers defend views that differ significantly in their details, they all endorse the following central idea: *unless democracy has epistemic value, there is no adequate case for its legitimacy*. This is the core thesis of epistemic democracy.

Why think democracy has epistemic value? Mill argues that inclusive democratic deliberation affords citizens with the "opportunity of exchanging error for truth" and the chance of acquiring a "livelier impression of truth" (Mill 1859: 21). Dewey emphasizes the crucial role of bringing citizens together to identify and solve problems of public interest, recognizing the collective wisdom that emerges from diverse perspectives (Dewey 1927). More recently, Estlund claims that democracy derives its authority in part from the epistemic benefits of public deliberation, which enhances our collective ability to track the truth (Estlund 2008). Building on this foundation, Landemore develops the Aristotelian idea that democracy has epistemic advantages because it maximizes the cognitive diversity of its citizens, which is brought to bear on collective problems in

the face of uncertainty (Landemore 2012). Viewed through this epistemic lens, a thriving democratic system enables us to pool widely dispersed information, refine the quality of our opinions through robust debate, and ultimately make decisions that are grounded in facts and well-reasoned arguments.

I will focus on the standard interpretation of epistemic democracy, which characterizes the epistemic goal of democracy in terms of *truth*. Here are some representative statements of this view:

> "The aim of democracy is to 'track the truth'." (List and Goodin 2001: 277)

> "Democracy is well-suited for tracking the independent truth." (Müller 2018: 1268)

> "Democracy is a good collective decision-making procedure because [. . .] it maximizes our collective chances to make the right choices." (Landemore 2012: 2)

As these quotes illustrate, the standard conception of epistemic democracy emphasizes the capacity of democratic processes to discover and adhere to truth. (I will assume for the sake of argument that there are such truths in politics, at least in the sense that some political choices can be made well or badly.)

Alternative epistemic theories may prioritize different goals. For instance, Gerald Gaus (1996) advocates an epistemic strategy that aims at yielding *justified beliefs*. Dewey posits that successful decision-making isn't about "tracking" or "corresponding" to political truth, but rather about our own reflective satisfaction with the practical results (Fuerstein 2021). Additionally, I have previously argued that *empathetic understanding* should be considered a valuable goal of democratic deliberation, distinct from the pursuit of truth (Hannon 2020). These perspectives demonstrate that epistemic democracy need not be solely concerned with truth. However, this paper will focus on the standard truth-tracking interpretation of epistemic democracy, as it remains the most common and influential approach in the literature.

Truth-tracking theories can be contrasted with *purely procedural* accounts of political legitimacy (Rawls 1993; Waldron 1999; Griffin 2003; Christiano 2008; Kolodny 2014). Proceduralists argue that democracy's legitimacy resides in the procedures it follows and the principles it expresses, not the outcomes it produces. The core tenet of proceduralism is that certain methods of decision-making or distributions of political power are inherently good, just, or legitimate, regardless of the results they yield. From this perspective, the value of democracy stems not from its ability to consistently arrive at the "correct" decisions, but rather because it embodies and upholds the fundamental principles of equality, fairness, and respect for individual autonomy. Proceduralists argue that by adhering to democratic processes such as free and fair elections, open deliberation, and the protection of civil liberties, a political system can claim legitimacy regardless of the specific policies or outcomes it generates.

A key advantage of proceduralism is that it avoids the need to make controversial assumptions about what constitutes the "correct" or "best" political outcomes. By focusing on the fairness and inclusivity of the decision-making process, rather than the specific content of the decisions themselves, proceduralism provides a framework for managing disagreement and ensuring that no single perspective dominates at the expense of others. This is particularly important in pluralistic societies where citizens hold a wide range of beliefs, values, and preferences.

I find procedural defenses of democracy compelling, but this paper sets proceduralism aside to focus on epistemic theories. While I do not endorse epistemic democracy in its conventional form, I believe this view has often been unfairly criticized.

My aim is to defend epistemic theories of democracy from what I see as misguided objections, despite my own reservations about these theories. By doing so, I hope to improve the discourse around epistemic democracy and pave the way for more substantive critiques. Ultimately, I will propose what I believe to be a more effective approach to critiquing epistemic theories of democracy.

Epistemic theories of democracy rely on two key theses:

The Normative Thesis

To be legitimate or justified, democratic procedures must have epistemic value.

The Descriptive Thesis

Democratic procedures do have epistemic value, i.e., they tend to track the truth.

These two theses are separable. You might accept both the descriptive and normative theses, reject both theses, or accept one and reject the other.

In the literature on political legitimacy, the primary dispute between proceduralists and epistemic theorists centers on the normative thesis. Epistemic democrats contend that democratic processes should be evaluated based on their ability to track the truth, while proceduralists reject this claim. The central question in this normative debate is how we should balance epistemic considerations against other factors when assessing the legitimacy of democracy.

Another crucial debate focuses on the descriptive thesis, which posits that democracy has epistemic value. This issue is part of a broader empirical debate about the actual outputs of democratic processes. Epistemic democrats argue that democratic procedures, such as public deliberation and voting, produce epistemically good outcomes. This claim is widely contested. Jason Brennan (2016) asserts that political participation can exacerbate biases, prejudices, and polarization among citizens. Ilya Somin (2016) argues that citizens are too ignorant for democracy to result in epistemically good outcomes. The descriptive thesis remains a highly contentious and actively debated issue in contemporary scholarship.

Having outlined the key tenets of epistemic theories of democracy, including their descriptive and normative commitments, I will now turn my attention to what I consider the two most common objections to these theories. The first is a conceptual puzzle according to which epistemic democracy is inherently self-undermining. The second is a normative challenge, asserting that the case for democracy should not rest on precarious epistemic grounds.

3. Is epistemic democracy self-undermining?

In this section, I will outline a basic puzzle for epistemic theories of democracy.[1] Fabienne Peter calls it the "authority dilemma," which she summarizes as follows:

[1]I will concentrate strictly on instrumentalist epistemic theories, which maintain that political institutions and procedures derive their justification from their capacity to generate epistemically good outcomes. I will set aside non-instrumental epistemic theories, such as Peter's (2008) pure epistemic proceduralism, which locate the epistemic value of democracy in the procedural features themselves rather than in the outcomes they produce.

The Authority Dilemma

> For those areas of decision-making where there is third-personal epistemic authority, we either follow those who know what the correct decision is, in which case our decision-making is not democratic, or we insist on democratic decision-making, in which case we can't defend the legitimacy of democracy on epistemic grounds. (Peter 2016: 138)

Let's unpack this a bit. Why does Peter believe that democracy cannot be defended on epistemic grounds?

Her argument is as follows. If epistemic democracy is sound, there must be a procedure-independent standard for the correctness of outcomes. But to justify democracy on epistemic grounds, we must first be able to identify the appropriate epistemic standard of judgment. Specifically, there must be an individual or group who possesses the authority to make claims about which democratic decisions are correct; otherwise, we would have no way of ascertaining whether political institutions are truly justified. But this requirement would make democratic decision-making either redundant or non-epistemic. If we defer to those who know what the correct decision is, then our decision-making process is not genuinely democratic (and also redundant). Conversely, if we instead insist on the democratic decision-making process itself, then we're not really defending democracy on epistemic grounds (Cf. Kelsen 1955: 2; Waldron 1999: 252–4; Valentini 2012: 191).

To illustrate this dilemma, Peter gives the following example:

The Town Bridge

> Suppose a town is considering the plan to build a new bridge across the river that runs through it. The decision on whether or not to build the bridge depends only on one factor, namely on the stability of the planned bridge. And suppose the town engineer has the expertise to assess whether the planned bridge is stable and concludes that it is. (Peter 2016: 134)

In this situation, a democratic decision would be unwise. The town engineer is a known expert, so his verdict should be sufficient to legitimize the decision to build the bridge. It would be pointless and dangerous to seek a democratic decision on whether or not the bridge is stable. Thus, there is no epistemic case for democracy when considering the planned bridge. As Peter (2016: 134) says, "If there is a correct decision to be made and if someone has legitimate epistemic authority to make claims about what the correct decision is, the epistemic case for democracy crumbles."

Other critics have framed this as an *epistemological problem* for epistemic theories of democracy (Gaus 2011; Ingham 2013; Muirhead 2014). The basic puzzle is: how can we know whether a procedure is likely to perform well according to some standard without having independent access to that standard? If the legitimacy of democracy hinges on its epistemic performance, there must be an authority competent to evaluate these outcomes. However, in a diverse and pluralistic society, achieving consensus on who qualifies as a legitimate epistemic authority on political matters is an elusive goal. There is no undisputed, publicly justifiable criterion for identifying expertise, nor is there widespread agreement on which political decisions are the "right" ones (Dahl 1989; Rawls 1993; Waldron 1999; Estlund 2008). Without access to such standards, we are left

with no choice but to rely on the very democratic decisions whose epistemic merits we seek to ascertain.

This epistemological challenge is perhaps the most common objection to epistemic theories of democracy (Gerlsbeck 2018: 223). In response to it, one might insist there *are* procedure-independent standards *and* that we sometimes have access to them. In other words, the epistemic circumstances of politics are not always characterized by intractable reasonable disagreement. Peter takes this line in her new book. She argues that legitimate political decisions are those made by individuals with "cognitive authority" in situations where this authority is not "epistemically underdetermined" (Peter 2023: 9).

The problem with this approach, however, is that it leads us back into the authority dilemma: the more likely it is that there are agreed-upon standards, the less likely it is that democratic decisions are necessary. (Peter endorses this conclusion.) Hans Kelsen made the same observation 70 years ago:

> The doctrine that democracy presupposes the belief that there exists an objectively ascertainable common good and that people are able to know it and therefore to make it the content of their will is erroneous. If it were correct, democracy would not be possible. (Kelsen 1955: 2)

An epistemic defense of democracy therefore appears to be self-undermining. Either it presupposes favorable epistemic circumstances that are incompatible with democracy, or it presupposes *un*favorable epistemic circumstances that are incompatible with a genuinely epistemic defense of democracy.

4. Avoiding the dilemma

To answer this challenge, there must be a way to justify democracy on the basis of its capacity to make good decisions without (a) leading us back into the authority dilemma or (b) making controversial assumptions about which decisions are the "right" ones. Is that possible? How can we be confident that a process tends to get the right answers, even if we don't know what would count as a right answer?

In this section, I will suggest several ways to resolve this predicament. To keep things simple, I'll focus on the epistemic version of the challenge, which can be summarized as follows:

> **The Epistemic Challenge for Epistemic Democracy**
>
> An epistemic justification for democracy requires showing that democratic procedures tend to yield correct decisions. However, there is widespread and persistent reasonable disagreement about which decisions are correct. The challenge is to show that democratic procedures are reliable without making any controversial assumptions about which outcomes are the "right" ones.

Is it possible to answer this challenge? Several theorists think not. Sean Ingham (2013: 149) says, "Any convincing epistemic argument for democratic procedures would have to presuppose answers to divisive political questions." Likewise, Peter (2016: 133) claims, "the attempt to defend democracy on epistemic instrumentalist grounds is self-undermining." How might epistemic democrats respond to this challenge?

One might initially think that the authority dilemma does not apply to certain aggregative conceptions of democracy, such as those that rely on Condorcet's Jury

Theorem (Goodin and Spiekermann 2018). According to CJT, if each voter has a better-than-even chance of making the right decision and votes independently, the likelihood that the majority will reach the correct outcome increases as the size of the electorate grows. On this view, we don't need to know in advance what the correct outcomes are; rather, we just need to establish that the conditions for CJT are met, allowing us to trust that democratic outcomes will be epistemically reliable without identifying the correct decision beforehand.

However, a version of the authority dilemma still arises for CJT. To apply the theorem, we need to assess whether the electorate is more reliable than chance on the relevant issues. This requires us to make judgments about the competence of the voters, which in turn presupposes knowledge of what the correct outcomes would be. Without such knowledge, we cannot verify whether the electorate is, in fact, more reliable than random chance. Thus, even with CJT, we are left needing an independent standard for evaluating the competence of voters, which brings us back into the same dilemma: either we presuppose epistemic authority and undermine the need for democratic procedures, or we rely on democratic processes without being able to justify their epistemic value (Peter 2023: 85).

Another common strategy is to point to *general features* of democratic decision-making procedures that plausibly enable us to track the truth. For example, John Stuart Mill argues that public deliberation and free speech enhance our ability to make epistemic progress. If we carefully consider contrasting viewpoints, this fosters opinions that are more soundly reasoned and buttressed by arguments (Mill 1859). On similar grounds, epistemic democrats have claimed that decisions made via democratic procedures enjoy some presumptive epistemic advantage. The public exchange of reasons can purportedly educate citizens about political issues, enlarge the pools of ideas, weed out bad arguments and factual errors, make us aware of what other people think, and increase our understanding of how political proposals may impact diverse others within society (Mill 1859; Dewey 1927; Young 1997; Anderson 2006; Martí 2006; Estlund 2008; Landemore 2012). A diversity of perspectives can also help to reduce cognitive and social biases, leading to a more objective picture of the social world (Mercier and Sperber 2017). As a result, societies will make more informed and balanced decisions.

However, skeptics may cast doubt on this approach They might argue that we've yet to resolve the key issue: How can we truly evaluate the epistemic quality of democratic procedures without relying on controversial standards of truth and rightness? The skeptic's argument goes deeper than just questioning the effectiveness of deliberation. They might point out that any claim about the epistemic benefits of democratic processes – whether it's about the educative effects of public discourse, the advantages of diverse perspectives, or the error-correcting nature of open debate – ultimately requires some benchmark against which to measure these supposed improvements. For instance, how can we definitively conclude that deliberation leads to epistemic improvement when there are persistent concerns about public ignorance, cognitive biases, and political polarization? The skeptic will argue that to make such assessments, we would need to presuppose certain standards of correctness that are themselves the subject of reasonable disagreement. What one group sees as progress towards truth, another might view as a departure from it. In a pluralistic society, how can we establish a non-controversial basis for judging the epistemic merits of democratic outcomes?

I believe that epistemic theorists have several strategies to address this concern, which I'll examine below. These strategies include: (1) calibration, which involves evaluating democratic performance in less controversial areas and extrapolating to more contentious ones; (2) appealing to evidence from minipublics, which demonstrates

the epistemic benefits of structured democratic deliberation in controlled settings; and (3) improving the status quo, which focuses on assessing whether democratic decisions lead to improvements over existing conditions. Each of these approaches offers a way to defend the epistemic value of democracy without relying on controversial standards of truth or rightness, thus rebutting the skeptic's challenge.

4.1. Calibration inside politics

Political systems can be *calibrated* by observing their decision-making performance in cases where performance is relatively uncontroversial. We can then generalize to cases where it would be too controversial to evaluate performance directly. Estlund proposes this strategy. To evaluate whether democracies make good decisions, he says we should look at whether they generally avoid "primary bads." These include evils that no reasonable point of view would deny are important to avoid, such as "war, famine, economic collapse, political collapse, epidemic, and genocide" (Estlund 2008: 163). We can empirically test how well various political systems avoid these bads. If democracy does reasonably well on these issues, that is evidence that its procedures will tend to make good decisions with respect to more contentious issues.

One might object that these "primary bads" are not as uncontroversial as Estlund claims (Gaus 2011: 293). For example, there might be reasonable disagreement about the morality of war, given that wars are sometimes justified. As a supplementary strategy, one could also appeal to a broader range of empirical evidence suggesting that democracies are generally better places to live than non-democracies along various dimensions. This comparative approach provides indirect evidence that democracies tend to make good choices, without relying on a narrow set of potentially contestable criteria. In comparison to monarchies, oligarchies, and dictatorships, democracies tend to prevent mass famine, grant more freedoms to their citizens, and experience fewer major policy disasters. Democracies also generally avoid waging war against each other, do not engage in mass murder of their own citizens, and tend to be more prosperous and peaceful (Sen 1999: 178; Halperin et al. 2010; Somin 2016: 9; Brennan 2016: 194–5).

While these facts don't prove that democracy is flawless or even the most effective system possible, they do show that we can measure its success without assumptions that violate reasonable pluralism. By demonstrating that democracies consistently outperform other forms of government across various outcomes, we can argue for the epistemic merits of democratic decision-making, even with disagreements about specific political issues or the exact definition of good governance.

4.2. Calibration outside politics

Instead of focusing exclusively on moral and political judgments, we can also start with nonpolitical cases where the answers are obvious or uncontentious. By doing so, we can establish the epistemic reliability of specific procedures in a particular domain and then extrapolate those findings to areas characterized by reasonable disagreement about the best outcomes. The fundamental characteristics that allow participants to discern the truth in one domain should, in principle, be applicable to issues where the standard of correctness is more contentious. This approach enables us to identify and validate the epistemic virtues of certain decision-making processes, even when the subject matter itself is open to debate.

To illustrate the potential of this approach, consider the findings presented by Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber in their book, *The Enigma of Reason*. They provide compelling evidence that people are more reliable when they reason together. They support this

claim with a wealth of experimental studies, but their most striking example is the Wason four-card selection task, a logical puzzle designed to test conditional reasoning. In this task, participants are presented with four cards, each displaying a letter or number on one side. They are then asked to test the validity of a rule, such as "If a card has a vowel on one side, then it has an even number on the other side." Although individual performance on this task is typically poor, with only around 15% of participants answering correctly, group discussions dramatically enhance the success rate, with up to 80% of participants arriving at the correct solution. Mercier and Sperber emphasize that "When argumentation is not involved, group performance is disappointing," underlining the critical role of deliberation in enhancing epistemic reliability.

This lends support to deliberative conceptions of democracy, which emphasize the importance of inclusive, reasoned discussion in collective decision-making. The Wason task is just one of many examples demonstrating that, in various contexts, inclusive deliberation tends to increase the chances that a group figures out the right answer to a given problem. Thus, we can assume that a political system that prioritizes widespread, substantive deliberation among its citizens is more likely to arrive at better-informed and epistemically sound decisions.

Admittedly, this type of calibration raises concerns about external validity. It is reasonable to question whether procedures that consistently lead to truth in one domain can be reliably extended to other contexts, particularly the complex and contentious realm of politics. This challenge is undoubtedly significant. In order to infer that democratic procedures are reliable, we must assume that the epistemic properties of procedures within one domain (where standards of correctness are clear) could be indicative of their epistemic value in another domain (where standards of correctness are controversial). That assumption can be challenged (Ingham 2013: 148–9). However, it does not necessarily imply that epistemic theories of democracy are "self-undermining" or conceptually incoherent. Instead, it serves as a cautionary reminder to approach the theorizing of how political systems contribute to good outcomes with prudence and humility. As Michael Bennett (ms: 21) observes, "We will need to proceed carefully in asking what causal factors lie behind the observed patterns of decision-making quality in our different sources, and whether these same causes are likely to apply in the different contexts of high-stakes politics." By acknowledging the limitations and potential pitfalls of cross-domain comparisons, we can engage in a more nuanced and reflective analysis of the epistemic merits of democratic procedures.

4.3. Minipublics

The epistemic merits of democratic deliberation have also been extensively studied in the context of minipublics (Niemeyer and Dryzek 2007; Fishkin 2018). Minipublics are relatively small, diverse, randomly selected panels of citizens brought together to discuss policy matters. These groups are designed to be representative of the larger population and to foster informed, reasoned discussion among participants.

Research on minipublics has consistently shown that when citizens are given the opportunity to deliberate in a structured setting with the help of a moderator, they become better informed about the issues at hand. Participants in minipublics often gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of policy problems, and they are exposed to a wider range of perspectives and arguments. This exposure can lead to more nuanced and well-reasoned opinions, as well as greater appreciation of the validity of differing viewpoints (Grönlund et al. 2017).

One of the strengths of the research on minipublics is that it does not rely on assumptions about what the "correct" policy outcomes are. Instead, researchers use pre- and post-deliberation surveys to measure participants' knowledge of the policy issues discussed. These surveys focus on factual information rather than normative judgments, with the presumption that as people become more informed, their views are more likely to track the truth (Fishkin 2018). In addition to measuring knowledge gains, researchers also assess participants' understanding of diverse perspectives by asking them to describe arguments for and against the policy in question both before and after deliberation. This allows researchers to track how exposure to different viewpoints can broaden participants' understanding of the issue.

Researchers also measure the degree of opinion convergence among minipublic participants. While convergence alone does not necessarily indicate epistemic success, it can be a sign that participants are considering and integrating diverse perspectives in a way that leads to more robust and well-justified conclusions (Niemeyer and Dryzek 2007). Another approach to evaluate the epistemic quality of minipublic deliberations is through argument mapping. This involves analyzing the structure and coherence of the arguments made by participants, as well as their use of evidence and reasoning (Bächtiger and Parkinson 2019). By assessing the quality of the deliberative process itself, researchers can gain insight into the epistemic value of its outcomes.

In response, critics argue that the findings from minipublic experiments, while interesting, tell us little about the epistemic merits of actual democracies. They contend that these structured, moderated discussions among small groups of citizens bear little resemblance to the messy, often polarized nature of political deliberation in real democratic societies. Moreover, the infrequent and isolated nature of these deliberative experiments means they fail to capture the persistent challenges faced by real-world democracies, such as entrenched power structures, media influence, and the complexities of long-term governance. In addition, skeptics may question the scalability of these experiments, arguing that what works for a group of 100 or 1,000 citizens cannot be meaningfully extrapolated to nations of millions. They point out that while minipublics have demonstrated citizens' capacity to deliberate knowledgeably about public policy issues, their temporary nature and lack of real political influence severely limit their impact on the overall decision-making quality of democracy.

I have two replies to these important concerns. First, while it's true that minipublic experiments don't perfectly mirror the complexities of large-scale democratic deliberation, they still offer valuable insights that can inform and improve our democratic practices. Indeed, the epistemic success of minipublics suggests that we should establish them as a permanent and more powerful component of a deliberative democratic system. In this vein, proposals have been made to utilize sortition in a bi-cameral legislature where one chamber would be elected and the other would be selected by random lottery (Gastil and Wright 2018). Alternatively, Alexander Guerrero's (2014) "lottocracy" system envisions replacing elected legislatures with randomly selected citizen assemblies. Along similar lines, Landemore's (2020: 13) "open democracy" model emphasizes the need for more inclusive and deliberative democratic institutions, with a large "open minipublic" at the center of a web of other minipublics.

Second, even if the current research on minipublics does not give us adequate reason to regard real democracies as living up to their epistemic potential, they nevertheless show how it is *in principle* possible to design epistemically reliable procedures without presupposing any narrow, controversial view of which outcomes are the correct ones. Put differently, research on minipublics demonstrates how to measure the epistemic merits of specific democratic procedures, thereby addressing the fundamental conceptual challenge outlined in §3. Thus, the empirical evidence from minipublics

provides a compelling proof of concept for the epistemic potential of democratic deliberation. As researchers continue to study minipublics and other deliberative forums, they can help identify the specific institutional design features and discursive norms that are most conducive to epistemic success.

4.4. Improving the status quo

Another strategy is to evaluate whether a particular decision is an *improvement* over the status quo, rather than focusing on identifying the all-things-considered best solution (Gerlsbeck 2018). This approach turns the perspective around. Instead of asking, "Is this the right outcome?" we can ask, "Did we get out of a specific bad state?" This strategy can be effective in situations where there is broad agreement about the existence of a problem but disagreement about the optimal solution.

Felix Gerlsbeck illustrates this point with the following example:

> Assume there is widespread unhappiness about sluggish economic growth, and deep disagreement about what should be done about it. Let's further assume that a fiscal stimulus package and tax cuts would both accelerate growth compared to the status quo, but they will not do so equally well. Now, it would a tall order for a political procedure to have to find out which one of those two proposals is better. But given that the problem in this situation is slow economic growth, which means that some people's demands are unnecessarily unmet, what matters first and foremost is that a procedure efficiently implements either solution, thus improving things relative to the problematic status quo, while allowing future review and revision. (Gerlsbeck 2018: 226–7)

As Gerlsbeck argues, this approach can be applied to a wide range of issues, such as famine, poverty, high unemployment, homelessness, and violent crime. In many cases, it may be unclear which solution will be the most effective, and sometimes there may be uncertainty about the effectiveness of any proposed solution in a specific context. Nevertheless, we can sometimes agree there has been a context-specific improvement, even if the "losing" side will maintain that their proposal would have yielded far better results.

The distinction between "weak" and "strong" political cognitivism, outlined by Hélène Landemore, is relevant here. Weak political cognitivism defines the standard of correctness in terms of the *avoidance of major harms or mistakes*, while strong political cognitivism defines it more assertively in terms of *tracking the truth* (Landemore 2012: 211–3). This distinction suggests two possible approaches to building the epistemic case for democracy. The second, more ambitious approach is to claim that democracy is epistemically valuable in terms of maximizing truth. The first, more modest approach is to argue that democracy is epistemically valuable in terms of reducing error or avoiding disaster. There is a clear asymmetry in the epistemic burden associated with these two approaches. For example, it is much harder to determine which healthcare system *best* promotes the common good than to recognize that a system leaving most people without access to a doctor and significantly lowering life expectancy is *bad* (Benson 2024: 188).

Although epistemic democracy is standardly interpreted as aiming at truth, some of its leading proponents have explicitly argued that weak political cognitivism offers a plausible notion of "truth" in politics (Estlund 2008; Landemore 2012). They favor this weaker approach because it is less contentious: it is generally easier to identify what should be avoided than to determine the optimal course of action. Furthermore, this

weaker stance can still provide a strong epistemic foundation for democracy. By emphasizing the ability of democratic processes to steer society away from clearly problematic states, rather than their ability to consistently identify the best possible outcomes, we can develop a more robust and defensible epistemic justification for democracy.

4.5. Interim summary

To summarize the discussion so far, I have explored a central challenge for epistemic theories of democracy: the need to demonstrate that democratic procedures tend to yield good decisions without presupposing which outcomes are "correct." I have suggested several complementary strategies for addressing this conceptual puzzle, including calibrating democratic procedures using uncontroversial cases, extrapolating from nonpolitical domains where epistemic reliability can be more easily established, and drawing on empirical research on minipublics. These approaches aim to show that it is possible, in principle, to epistemically assess democracy without relying on contentious standards of correctness.[2]

However, even if this conceptual challenge can be addressed, epistemic theories face another significant obstacle: they must demonstrate that real-world democracies are, in fact, epistemically successful. This brings us to the second major challenge confronting these theories. If democracy lacks its purported epistemic advantages, then a commitment to epistemic instrumentalism would compel us to abandon democracy. In this way, epistemic theories of democracy may contain the seeds of their own potential demise. They render the justification of democracy contingent upon its epistemic performance relative to other systems of government. I take up this worry in the next section.

5. Should we bet democracy on epistemology?

As discussed above, epistemic democrats tie the legitimacy of political institutions and procedures to the quality of their outcomes. Thus, a political system that consistently yields poor decisions lacks legitimacy. For this reason, Cristina Lafont (2020: 77) notes that epistemic democracy is *essentially* committed to epistocracy and only *contingently* committed to democracy. If democracy were shown not to be an epistemically effective system, and, for example, a benevolent dictator could achieve better results, then epistemic considerations would lead us to abandon democracy for epistocracy.

By tying the legitimacy of democracy to its outcomes, epistemic democrats are essentially taking a gamble that can be stated as follows:

The Epistemic Gamble

By introducing an epistemic dimension into politics, we risk jeopardizing rather than supporting the case for democracy. The epistemic competence of democracy is highly contested, given concerns about public ignorance, cognitive bias, and misinformation. When proponents of epistemic democracy assert that the

[2]This falsifies Rorty's argument against truth as the aim of inquiry. He claims, "you cannot aim at something, cannot work to get it, unless you can recognize it once you have got it . . . We shall never know for sure whether a given belief is true . . . So I think the topic of truth cannot be made relevant to democratic politics" (Rorty 2000: 2). Contra Rorty, I argued above that democratic procedures can aim at the truth without being able to recognize when they have it.

legitimacy of democracy hinges on its epistemic competence, they wager the case for democracy on its presumed epistemic reliability.

This raises the question: Should we take this bet? Is it not reckless to base the legitimacy of democracy on precarious epistemic grounds?[3]

Many theorists are reluctant to justify democracy on epistemic grounds precisely to avoid the risk of having to abandon it in the face of contradictory evidence (Saffon and Urbinati 2013; Urbinati 2014; Invernizzi-Accetti 2017). They argue that basing the legitimacy of democracy on its presumed epistemic competence is a risky gambit that could ultimately erode the very foundations of democratic governance.[4] This concern has been foregrounded by epistemic theorists themselves. Estlund (2008: 7) warns, "The biggest objection to bringing in the epistemic dimension is that it might to tend to justify rule by the knowers—what we might call epistocracy." Similarly, José Luis Martí (2006) states, "One of the main fears about the epistemic conception of democracy in general is that it can lead us to elitist views."

To safeguard democracy, epistemic theorists might fall back on the more modest position that epistemic factors are not the sole determinants of political legitimacy. According to this view, the tendency to yield correct decisions may provide a strong reason to prefer democracy over alternative forms of government, but it need not be the only or even the primary justification. As Robert Goodin and Kai Spiekermann (2018: 312) assert, "That they have considerable epistemic virtues is not the only, and maybe not even the principal, thing to be said in favor of democratic procedures. Still, that is definitely a major good-making feature of democracy." From this perspective, even if authoritarianism were shown to be more epistemically competent, we would not be forced to abandon democracy, as its legitimacy would rest on a combination of epistemic and non-epistemic factors (Estlund 2008).

However, this weaker form of epistemic democracy remains susceptible to the "epistemic gamble" concern. While epistemic success might not be the sole or primary factor in favor of democracy, epistemic democrats still consider it a *necessary* condition for legitimacy. A political system that consistently makes poor decisions would, therefore, lack legitimacy. Estlund, for instance, argues that democracy would have no normative authority – no right to demand obedience to its decisions – if it failed to meet a minimal epistemic standard, which he defines as "better than random" (Estlund 2008: 98). Similarly, Goodin and Spiekermann (2018: 309) contend that "incompetence" would erode democratic legitimacy. Consequently, introducing *any* epistemic element into the justification for democracy, even as a non-decisive factor, still exposes it to the risks associated with the epistemic gamble.

To further mitigate risk, one might weaken the epistemic claim even more. Specifically, one could propose that truth-tracking is merely a "good-making" feature of democracy, rather than a necessary condition for its legitimacy. However, this view

[3]It is worth noting that epistemic democrats rely on another controversial assumption: they presume the existence of normative political truths. This is also a form of gamble, albeit a metaphysical rather than an epistemological one. If such truths do not exist in the political realm, political legitimacy could not be grounded in any such facts. However, I will set this concern aside. I find it plausible that there are at least some political truths, in the sense that certain political choices can be made well or poorly. Denying this would imply that there are no better or worse decisions in politics, or that there are no truths about what society ought to do – a position that seems difficult to defend.

[4]Interestingly, Landemore (2014: 196) maintains that appealing to epistemic considerations may *block* the specter of epistocracy. She writes, "while epistemic democrats are always suspected of opening the door to the rule of experts, their arguments might actually provide a way to close that door for good: by establishing that democracies and their procedures are, all things considered, a better epistemic bet than expertocracies."

would not qualify as a genuinely *epistemic* defense of democracy, as it rejects the normative thesis that democratic procedures must have epistemic value to be justified. Instead, proponents of this view would have to root democracy's legitimacy in non-epistemic principles like equality, participation, and freedom.

In summary, even weaker forms of epistemic democracy, which do not treat epistemic considerations as decisive, still raise concerns about epistemic risk. Democracy may not prove to be particularly impressive from an epistemic standpoint. Thus, linking democracy's legitimacy to its epistemic performance may undermine the very foundations of democratic governance. For this reason, many theorists reject epistemic theories of democracy.

In the next section, I will argue that this criticism fails for several reasons. First, it misunderstands the instrumental nature of epistemic defenses of democracy. Second, it ignores the principled reasons for considering epistemic competence as a crucial component of political legitimacy. Third, it overlooks the fact that a theory should not be rejected merely because it challenges our preconceptions or leads to counterintuitive results.

6. Abandon democracy – so what?

The argument in the previous section can be summarized as follows:

The "Risky Bet" Argument

1. Epistemic theories might not favor democracy.
2. Therefore, we shouldn't attempt to justify democracy on epistemic grounds.

As discussed in §5, this critique is commonly leveled against epistemic defenses of democracy. However, this argument is problematic for at least three reasons.

First, the criticism that epistemic theories might lead to the abandonment of democracy is a nonstarter because it merely highlights the logical implications of the instrumental approach to democracy, which is endorsed by all epistemic democrats (Ziliotti 2019: 421).[5] As instrumentalists, epistemic democrats are willing to defend democracy to the extent that it produces desirable outcomes. They view democracy as a means to an end, valuable not intrinsically but for the results it yields. Openness to the possibility of non-democratic decision-making processes, provided they can generate better political outcomes, is precisely what it means to be an instrumentalist. Therefore, the potential for epistemic considerations to justify non-democratic arrangements is not a weakness of epistemic theories, but rather a consistent application of their underlying principles.

Moreover, it is misleading to characterize this approach as placing a "risky bet." Epistemic democrats are not gambling blindly. They are willing to consider non-democratic alternatives only when those alternatives demonstrably outperform democracy in making good political decisions. This is not the picture painted by critics, who envision a false dichotomy between democracy and oppressive regimes like totalitarian dictatorships, which have historically made poor political decisions. This oversimplifies the range of potential alternatives. As Jonathan Benson (2024: 11) points out, there exists a diverse spectrum of non-democratic institutions that epistemic theorists might consider, including free markets, polycentric governance systems, and

[5]As mentioned earlier, I am setting aside non-instrumental epistemic theories of democracy.

political meritocracy. These alternatives extend far beyond traditional rivals such as autocracy and oligarchy. In essence, the epistemic approach is not a gamble but a commitment to pursuing the most effective decision-making arrangements for society's benefit. If democracy's epistemic competence were refuted, it would simply provide a reasoned basis for exploring *better* alternative arrangements, always with the goal of making wise decisions that benefit society as a whole.

Second, the "risky bet" argument ignores the principled reasons that epistemic theorists have given for considering a political system's ability to make good decisions as a crucial component of its legitimacy. To dismiss epistemic theories simply because they *might* entail non-democratic arrangements is to overlook the substantive arguments for why good decision-making is an essential aspect of any legitimate political system. As Benson (2024: 21) aptly notes, "Political decisions affect our ability to put food on the table, educate our children, care for the sick, protect the natural environment, and pursue our life plans. It is therefore only to be expected that many people will wish to have a form of government which can take these decisions in an informed and considered fashion." For this reason, democrats cannot and should not simply wave aside epistemic theories. While some may fear that considering epistemic values opens the door to non-democratic forms of rule, the greater threat may lie in dismissing the importance of making good political decisions without directly addressing the relevant arguments.

A more fruitful way for advocates of democracy to engage with instrumentalists would be to challenge them to articulate why achieving certain political outcomes is more important than realizing certain political conditions that can only be expressed through democratic processes. In this vein, critics should press epistemic democrats to clarify why securing good epistemic outcomes is theoretically more significant than, say, ensuring liberty, equality, and self-determination. These are key questions central to the debate between instrumental and non-instrumental theories of democracy, and they provide a promising starting point for a substantive and illuminating exchange between these two camps.[6]

Third, a theory is not incorrect simply because it leads to conclusions that challenge the status quo. If there are strong arguments for the claim that political legitimacy requires an epistemic dimension, then we must engage with those arguments on their merits, even if they lead to conclusions that challenge our deeply held beliefs. We cannot reject these theories simply because they make us uncomfortable or because they suggest that our current political practices may be inadequate. Instead, we must carefully examine the premises and logic of these arguments and see where they lead us. If we find that the epistemic case for political legitimacy is sound, then we must be willing to follow the implications of that conclusion, even if it means rethinking our commitment to democracy as it currently exists.

To illustrate this point, we can turn to other areas of philosophy where theories are not dismissed simply because they lead to counterintuitive conclusions. Consider Peter Singer's (1972) argument in his seminal paper "Famine, Affluence, and Morality." In it, Singer argues that if we can prevent something bad from happening without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we are morally required to do so. This principle leads to the radical conclusion that relatively affluent individuals are morally required to donate a significant portion of their wealth to alleviate suffering and prevent death due to poverty-related causes.

For many people, Singer's conclusion is highly counterintuitive. It challenges our familiar notions of moral obligation and charity, and it implies that most of us are living

[6]For a similar suggestion, see Ziliotti (2019: 421).

in a state of constant moral failure, as we prioritize our own desires and conveniences over the urgent needs of others. However, the fact that Singer's conclusion is counterintuitive is not a valid reason to reject his argument. If his premises are plausible and his logic is valid, then we are forced to grapple with the implications of his argument, no matter how difficult or unsettling they may be. We cannot simply dismiss his argument because we don't like where it leads us.

Consider another example: libertarianism about free will. This view holds that to justify moral responsibility, human actions must not be determined by prior causes or external factors. However, whether human actions are indeed free from such determinism is highly contentious. If it turns out that human actions are deterministic, then we may need to abandon or significantly revise our deepest assumptions about moral responsibility. The question arises: Should we reject libertarianism about free will to avoid this problematic implication? I submit that we should not. The mere fact that a conclusion calls for a revision of our practices is not a sufficient reason to reject the thesis that led to it. Instead, the appropriate response is to critically examine the reasons for accepting the link between libertarian free will and moral responsibility, and challenge those if necessary.

The same is true of epistemic theories of democracy. If these theories are based on sound arguments and plausible premises, then we cannot dismiss them simply because they lead to conclusions that challenge our firmly held commitments. Instead, we must engage with the arguments on their merits and follow the logic where it leads.

Landemore echoes this sentiment. She argues that our discomfort with the potential consequences of an argument should not deter us from engaging with it seriously:

> [The epistemic theory] makes proceduralist/intrinsic democrats uncomfortable because they think that if epistemic democrats are wrong, then our commitment to democracy will collapse. First of all, I am tempted to answer: So what? Since when should we as political theorists be tied only to propositions that happen to support our current prejudices? The proceduralist fear sounds like a very unscientific endorsement of motivated reasoning. (Landemore 2014: 195)

In a later article, Landemore emphasizes the same point:

> The first thing to remark is that *fear of the consequences of an argument does not amount to a good case against it*. As political theorists, we should not shy away from inquiries just because they may question the foundations of our most cherished beliefs. This is especially true since pursuing epistemic explorations may well force us to produce better reasons for democracy and help us put it on a more secure footing than we currently have. (Landemore 2017: 288, emphasis mine)

Landemore makes two important points here. First, if the epistemic case for democracy is sound, then we should be prepared to follow the logic wherever it leads, even if it challenges our deeply held beliefs about the value of democracy. Second, far from undermining democracy, grappling with epistemic arguments can ultimately strengthen the case for it. By forcing us to confront difficult questions and develop more robust justifications, this process can lead to a richer understanding of democracy's value. Avoiding these arguments out of fear is not only intellectually cowardly but also a missed opportunity to deepen our commitment to democratic principles.

This is not to say that we should abandon democracy at the first sign of trouble or that we should constantly be searching for something better. As argued in §4.1,

democracy has proven to be a remarkably resilient and adaptable system, and it has brought immense benefits to countless people around the world. However, it would be a mistake to treat it as an unassailable or immutable ideal. It is important to recognize that democracy, for all its merits, may simply be the best form of government we have devised thus far. Just as political systems have evolved and progressed throughout history, we should remain open to the prospect of discovering or developing more effective alternatives.

I will conclude by proposing a more effective strategy for critiquing epistemic theories of democracy. The case against epistemic democracy does not require demonstrating that democracy is epistemically flawed (i.e., that the descriptive claim fails), nor should it hinge on unease about its contingent basis. Instead, the most compelling critique would, for the sake of argument, accept the claim that democracy is epistemically superior and then demonstrate that this view still neglects something essential. By taking this approach, we can highlight what epistemic theories fail to capture, *even if we grant that democracy is the epistemically best system*. In short, the normative thesis should be challenged on its own terms, rather than dismissed simply because it leads to unpleasant conclusions. The strongest defense of democracy against epistemic critiques lies not in avoiding them, but in directly addressing them and showing that democracy's value extends beyond its epistemic virtues.

7. Conclusion

I have considered two prominent challenges to epistemic theories of democracy: the "authority dilemma" and the "epistemic gamble." These arguments contend that grounding democracy's legitimacy in its epistemic qualities is either conceptually incoherent or practically risky. However, I have argued that these challenges are unpersuasive. The self-undermining argument rests on the assumption that epistemic democracy requires access to an independent, uncontroversial standard of correctness. As I have shown, there are ways to calibrate and assess the epistemic performance of democracy without making controversial assumptions that violate reasonable pluralism. The epistemic gamble, on the other hand, relies on a misguided reluctance to engage with arguments that challenge our preconceptions about democracy. It rejects epistemic theories not because they are false, but because they may lead to uncomfortable conclusions. This is not a valid reason to dismiss these theories.

Of course, none of this is to say that the epistemic case for democracy is airtight or that epistemic considerations should be the only factor in justifying political systems. Epistemic democrats may still need to grapple with the existence of reasonable disagreement, the problem of public ignorance, and the role of non-epistemic values in politics. But what this article has attempted to show is that two of the most common arguments against epistemic democracy are not as powerful as they may first appear.

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