Epistemic Approaches to Democracy

This entry introduces the idea of establishing the value of democracy on the basis of epistemic merits expected to accrue from certain democratic procedures. The discussion of such *epistemic approaches* to democracy blends epistemological issues (including those of rational choice and probability) with political philosophy and political science. The entry critically reviews various approaches and ends by discussing what is known as *Condorcet’s jury theorem*.

Epistemic approaches to democracy argue that its value consists at least partly in the tendency of some democratic arrangements to make good political decisions. The name, based on the Greek word for knowledge or wisdom, *epistêmê*, was coined only recently by Jules Coleman and John Ferejohn, though the approach appears throughout the tradition—as far back as in the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau or more recently in the work of Alexander Meiklejohn. Epistemic approaches are not committed to moral consequentialism, since they might be combined with noninstrumental moral principles of justice or justification.

Democracy has long been burdened by the charge that it is absurd to decide such important matters by neglecting the differences between those who have relevant knowledge or abilities and those who do not. There are two alternative responses to the *epistemic critique of democracy*. First, in a nonepistemic approach to democracy, one devises an account of the value of democracy that does not depend on its having any particular epistemic virtues—any particular tendency to make good decisions. Second, in an epistemic approach to democracy, one accepts the epistemic demands and argues that democracy *can* meet them.

Some theories argue that (properly arranged) democratic procedures are epistemically the best methods possible. The losing voter is expected to take the outcome of the vote as her best evidence on the question and, presumably, to change her mind (a classic example of such a thesis being Rousseau’s theory). An alternative view, espoused by David Estlund, denies that greater wisdom gives anyone the right to rule unless their expertise is itself beyond reasonable denial.

Many advocates of democracy have preferred a *nonepistemic* approach. One reason is that the idea of a fair political procedure by which the people rule themselves might account for our democratic convictions even without any appeal to good decisions. Casting democracy as a right to self-rule, however, threatens to neglect the obvious fact that voters decide the rules for others as well as for themselves. Emphasizing fair procedure rather than self-rule prompts a distinct worry. The thin idea of an equal procedure does not justify voting procedures for choosing policies rather than random procedures.
such as flipping a coin. If voting is to be preferred to random methods, it is evidently not on grounds of fair procedure alone and might even be on unstated epistemic grounds.

An important mathematical result that derives from Marquis de Condorcet (in his *Essay on the Application of Analysis to the Probability of Majority Decisions*, 1775) shows that a group of voters, each of whom is better than random, using majority rule, can perform better even than the best of the individual voters. Performance improves as the group gets larger, approaching infallibility. Applying this “jury theorem” to the case of democratic voting is problematic for at least the following three reasons: (1) the mathematical results are far less impressive if the choice is between more than two alternatives; (2) voters who are influenced by other voters in certain ways do not allow for the full mathematical effect, and so deep structures of influence can dampen the results significantly; and (3) voters who, as most humans do, have various prejudices, blind spots, or rational defects might be worse than random, in which case the jury theorem drives the group’s competence just as impressively toward certain error.

The jury theorem approach does not rely on any epistemic benefits of communication, as other epistemic approaches do. In some contexts, interpersonal communication clearly improves a group’s epistemic competence, and public deliberation about political decisions may have some of these epistemically beneficial features. Critics of “deliberative democracy” (a family of views that only sometimes takes this epistemic form), however, argue that interpersonal deliberation is often distorted by power dynamics, by tendencies to follow the herd, and so on.

On some views, the standards of correctness for decisions are independent of the deliberative process, just as a sum of two numbers is independent of the method used to find it. On other views, including several “pragmatist” epistemic approaches to democracy influenced by Dewey and others, a just or correct political decision is one that was (or would have been) produced by correctly arranged public political deliberation. A closely related family of views also holds that the standards are constituted by actual or hypothetical deliberative processes, not (as in the pragmatist variant) processes of inquiry but processes of individual pursuit of interests in a morally appropriate framework.

Epistemic approaches do not assume that actually existing democracies make good decisions, or even that greatly improved arrangements would lead to predominantly good decisions. What makes them count as epistemic approaches is their holding that an adequate normative theory of democracy’s legitimacy, authority, or justification depends partly on some tendency of (some) democratic arrangements to make good political decisions by aiming to do so.

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See also Collective Rationality; Communicative Action Theory; Decision Theory; Judgment Aggregation and the Discursive Dilemma; Pragmatism; Public Reason and Justification; Social Epistemology

Further Readings


