

Johannes Giesinger

Education as the Remedy: The Justification of Democracy and the Epistocratic Challenge

Conference “*Liberal Democratic Education: A Paradigm in Crisis*”, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, August 28–29, 2021

1 Introduction

The justification of democratic education mostly presupposes an already justified conception of democracy. The natural idea is, then, that democratic education is justified in its function to establish, stabilize and develop the democratic order. This justification of democratic education is ‘public-centred’ (Schouten, 2018) in the sense that it refers to the public interest in sustaining democracy.¹ But what if it is called into question that the democratic order itself is justified? It might be questioned whether democratic decision-making leads to appropriate results.

Jason Brennan (2016, p. 161) has argued *Against Democracy* (to cite the title of his book), stating that “most of my fellow citizens are incompetent, ignorant, irrational, and morally unreasonable about politics.” Most of them, he claims, are either ‘hobbits’ or ‘hooligans’. The first group of citizens – akin to the hobbits in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* – is most comfortable at home and does not care much for what goes on in the world. This group of people is politically uninterested and uninformed, while hooligans have strong partisan or ideological views and consume information in a biased way. A third group of citizens – Brennan calls them ‘vulgans’, referring to *Star Trek* – is not only well-informed, but also highly rational in processing information. Unfortunately, according to Brennan, vulgans are rare in the citizenry of our democracies, and that is why democracy runs into problems.

The alternative he proposes is *epistocracy*, the rule of the knowers: There is a whole variety of epistocratic models of government – from a rule of experts or philosopher kings, as in Plato’s *Republic* (Plato, 2000) – to a system of plural votes for the competent (as proposed by John Stuart Mill²), or the exclusion of the incompetent from voting. While all these models are undemocratic in the sense that they run counter to the rule

¹ Alternatively, democratic education might be justified in individualistic terms, referring to persons’ interest in political participation.

² Mill makes his first remarks on plural voting in his “Thoughts on Parliamentary Reform“, published 1859 (Mill, 1977, p. 324).

that each person should have one vote, not all of them are also illiberal. Liberal forms of epistocracy may not provide full political equality to all citizens, but can nevertheless protect other basic rights and liberties, including the right to personal autonomy.

According to one possible reading of Brennan's argument, our traditional hopes in (democratic) education are illusory. Education has been thought of as essential in cultivating human beings, and also democratic citizens, at least since the eighteenth century. Against this backdrop, the natural reply to Brennan's approach is that if citizens are incompetent, they should receive a better education. In other words, education – not epistocracy – is the remedy for incompetence.

Contrasting education and epistocracy in this way, however, clouds the fact that the two are closely related – as is obvious to anyone reading Plato's *Republic*. Both education and epistocracy are strongly linked to the issue of knowledge. Education is often thought of in epistemic terms, namely, as the transmission or possession of knowledge and knowledge-related capacities and attitudes, such as the capacity to gain and evaluate knowledge. Clearly, if epistocracy is the rule of the knowers, these people must have become knowers in some way or other – namely through education. Consequently, David Estlund (2008, p. 212) uses the expression “epistocracy of the educated”, characterizing it as follows: “Where some are well-educated and others are not, the polity would (other things being equal) be better ruled by giving the well-educated more votes.” This presupposes that certain forms of education, knowledge and competence are relevant in political decision-making, and that the well-educated in fact have access to that kind of knowledge, and can therefore make ‘correct’ decisions in political matters, or at least better decisions than those less educated.

In this essay, I first consider different ways of justifying democracy, in relation to the problem of democratic education and the challenge from epistocracy (2, 3 and 4). I then go on to discuss the role of education within an epistocratic system: It might be argued that education cannot function as the remedy for political incompetence (5). More plausibly, it will be acknowledged that any epistocratic system heavily relies on education: Considerations of educational *justice* seem relevant in an epistocratic system committed to basic liberal values (6). The question is, however, whether educational inequalities also touch on the *legitimacy* of the epistocratic system (7).

2 The justification of democracy

The project of a justification of democracy, as it is understood here, refers to the problem of *political legitimacy*, that is, the question of the legitimate use of political power. In the Rawlsian tradition, the issue of legitimacy has been distinguished from the question of *justice* (Rawls, 1993). This distinction raises further questions, but it might be said that justice is concerned with “what is owed to people” (Peter, 2009, p. 1), while

legitimacy refers to the question of how the just social order might be imposed on people (Pettit, 2012, p. 60). Speaking of *democratic* legitimacy, the basic idea is that the exercise of power is legitimate if it is rooted in democratic practices and procedures. The question is then, “what normative conditions should apply to democratic decision-making”, in order to make the resulting political measures legitimate (Peter, 2009, p. 1).

In the justification of democracy, various strands might be distinguished. For one, we can distinguish moral and epistemic arguments. While the former somehow refer to moral values such as equality or autonomy, the latter point to the epistemic advantages of democratic decision-making, namely its purported propensity to generate ‘correct’ decisions. Standards of correctness, as they are thought of in this context, do not only refer to factual issues, but also to moral questions. For democracy to be preferable in epistemic terms means, then, that it leads to outcomes that can be considered as ‘morally correct’ or ‘just’.

Moreover, we might speak of instrumentalist and non-instrumentalist types of justification. Reference to equality as embodied by democratic procedures³ would be part of a non-instrumentalist justification (Christiano, 2008). By contrast, we might speak of epistemic instrumentalism as the view that democracy is an appropriate means to bring about the right epistemic outcomes. It should also be noted that there are epistemic justifications of democracy that are not – or not purely – instrumentalist: In justifying democracy, we might ascribe some epistemic value to democratic procedures themselves, and not be exclusively concerned with the outcomes (Peter 2016, p. 82; Peter 2009, p 120). Also, there are non-epistemic-instrumentalist justifications: For instance, Amartya Sen (1999, p. 152) famously claimed that democracy prevents famines.

In what follows, I focus on the epistemic-instrumentalist justification and one version of a non-instrumentalist moral argument that highlights the notion of an equal status of all persons. As it will turn out, this moral argument is also related to epistemic issues. I discuss both these arguments in relation to a) the problem of democratic education, and b) the challenge arising from the epistocratic critique of democracy.

3 Epistemic instrumentalism

Epistemic instrumentalism states that democracy is legitimate because it leads to correct decisions, or decisions that are epistemically superior to the decisions made in non-democratic systems. The basic idea behind this line of thought is that one person deciding on his or her own, e. g. a king or a dictator, might easily err even if he or she

³ In this context, we might also speak of ‘procedural’ accounts of democracy. However, it must be noted that democratic procedures can embody substantive values (such as equality).

acts in good faith. A group of people, however, might be able to detect epistemic errors and come to the right conclusion in an epistemically sound procedure.⁴ This is especially plausible if we think of citizens deliberating with each other and exchanging reasons. In other words, the model of a so-called deliberative democracy that entails public deliberation and is not reduced to the casting of votes seems epistemically especially advantageous (Peter, 2016; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). In particular, it allows people from various walks of life to bring in their own perspectives, thereby avoiding a one-sided take on social problems.

It is immediately clear, how this justificatory framework involves and justifies education. Public deliberation and decision-making can only be epistemically adequate if the people involved are competent and ‘educated’. One way to put this is to say that (democratic) education is *instrumental* in generating epistemically adequate outcomes. Thus, the (instrumentalist) justification of democracy implies an instrumentalist justification of education. Another way to express this is to say that the epistemic-instrumentalist justification is only plausible *under the condition* that the citizenry is democratically educated. In other words, the justification of democracy itself is undermined by the lack of education.

Consider, however, the following threat to the epistemic-instrumentalist argument (for democracy) – which might result in an epistemic-instrumentalist repudiation of democracy and a turn to epistocracy: If the aim is to generate epistemically good outcomes, focussing on education is not the only – and maybe not the best – thing to do. The epistocratic solution is to exclude the politically incompetent from political authority, or to provide more competent people with more political authority than others. This might even result in a rule of experts. After all, we leave many decisions up to experts. It would be absurd to have people vote about how surgery is done in the right way, or about how a bridge is to be built. These examples presuppose that there are (objective) truths that should inform our decision-making in particular fields. If such truths exist, it makes sense to let those decide who have a real insight into these truths. Against this backdrop, Estlund (2008, p. 30) formulates what he calls the “Authority Tenet”, without defending it: “The normative political knowledge of those who know better is a warrant for their having political authority over others.”

I would like to briefly mention two immediate objections against the epistocratic model, both put forward by Estlund. A first objection is that “authority does not simply follow from expertise. [...] You may be correct, but what makes you boss?” (Estlund 2008, p.

⁴ Consider, in this context, the discussion on the so-called Condorcet jury theorem, e.g. Peter (2009, p. 112–113), Estlund (2008, p. 15), or Anderson (2006).

3). We might also say that being an expert provides persons with epistemic authority – not practical or political authority: Ascribing epistemic authority to persons means that there is reason to believe what they say, but this does not directly translate into them having legitimate power over us or others. Assuming that political power follows directly from competence is – to use Estlund’s expression – to commit the “expert/boss fallacy” (ibid.).

Another objection also raised by Estlund (2008, p. 7) is that even if there are objective truths, and there are experts with special insights into these truths, there are still many important political questions over which reasonable people can disagree. Among other things, people might also reasonably disagree about what makes someone an ‘expert’ or a ‘wise person’. The notion of reasonable disagreement – that plays a crucial in Rawls’s account of political liberalism (Rawls 1993) – might thus be used to justify introducing democratic decision-procedures, at least in some areas. That said, we might still argue that those who are obviously incompetent and uninformed should not be granted equal political authority, because they threaten to taint the epistemic outcomes of decision-procedures.

4 Equality and the threshold of competence

Let us now go through the same steps with the second line of argument that I would like to consider – an argument based on the notion of an equal status of citizens. As Thomas Christiano (2008) puts it, “[d]emocratic decision making is the unique way to publicly embody equality in collective decision making under the circumstances of pervasive conscientious disagreement, in which we find ourselves” (p. 75–76). Democracy, then, is justified, as it expresses the idea that we are equals and have an equal say in matters of collective relevance. Consequently, the exclusion of persons from democratic processes denies them the status as equals. However, as Christiano (2008, p. 128) adds, the status of an equal is restricted to minimally competent persons. In his view, persons must meet a threshold level of competence in order to count as democratic equals. As Christiano further argues, differences of competence above this threshold do not justify inequalities of political authority.

If political authority is dependent on competence, and everybody should have equal political authority, then everybody should be educated in a way to qualify for political authority. This is a possible democratic argument for democratic education. Here, education functions as a precondition for the ascription of a normative status. Since it is assumed that persons have (or should have) this status, they must be provided with the appropriate kind of education that legitimises them to take over that status. So, citizens’ political authority goes along with a right to (political) education. It is natural, then, to put forward the demand for a democratic threshold in education: Everybody

should be educated in ways that is ‘adequate’ or ‘sufficient’ with regard to the preconditions of democratic participation. This line of thought leads to a democratic adequacy view of educational justice (Anderson 2007; Satz 2007; Gutmann 1987).

The argument just outlined is based on the notion of competence as a *formal* condition for political equality. It can be distinguished from a similar consideration: We might argue that incompetence *effectively* excludes persons from political participation. Granting persons formal equality might not be enough, then – they must also be adequately educated.

However, as is the case of the epistemic-instrumentalist justification, there is another road to go here – the road to epistocracy. The straightforward idea is that if competence is a precondition for political authority, then the incompetent should have no political authority (or at least less authority than the competent). Brennan (2016, p. 141–142) starts off his argument at a different angle, stating that people have a right not to be subjected to political decisions by incompetent people. He defines his “competence principle” as follows:

It is presumed to be unjust and to violate a citizen’s right to forcibly deprive them of life, liberty, or property, or significantly harm their life prospects, as a result of decisions made by an incompetent deliberative body, or as a result of a decision made in an incompetent way or in bad faith. Political decisions are presumed legitimate and authoritative only when produced by competent political bodies in a competent way and in good faith.

Brennan’s conclusion is, then, that universal suffrage undermines competent decision-making and should therefore be replaced by an epistocratic model. This argument focuses on the notion of legitimate political decision procedures and looks at it both from the side of those who are subjected to it, and those who make decisions: First, it is illegitimate to subject people to political measures grounded in incompetent decision-making. Second, the politically incompetent should not be allowed to take part in legitimate political decision-making. Brennan (2016), speaking of “competent political bodies”, uses a collectivist formulation. In an earlier statement of the argument, he directly refers to individual citizens, arguing that “when some citizens are morally, unreasonable, ignorant or incompetent about politics, this justifies not granting them political authority over others” (Brennan, 2011, p. 713). Brennan calls this the “antiauthority

tenet”, formulated in reaction to Estlund’s “authority tenet” (as already cited, Estlund, 2008, p. 30).⁵

As Brennan points out, this line of argument is not subject to the expert-boss fallacy. Estlund makes it seem as if defenders of epistocracy are necessarily committed to the view that expertise directly grounds political authority. Brennan (2011) explains that his epistocratic argument does not make this claim: “The competence principle does not say that experts should be bosses; it says that incompetent and unreasonable people should not be imposed upon others as bosses” (p. 713). In doing so, Fabienne Peter (2016, p. 85) notes, the competence principle sets up a threshold of competence that must be reached by citizens as one of the preconditions for political authority, not as its direct foundation. It could be added that Brennan’s argument also seems to escape the second objection set out by Estlund: While it must be controversial who should count as a true political or moral expert, it seems possible to define a basic level of competence in a generally acceptable way. After all, some conception of competence seems also necessary within a democratic account.

5 Education – not the remedy?

The democratic response to the alleged incompetence of citizens is democratic (political, civic) education. The epistocratic reaction is, first and foremost, to exclude the incompetent from political power, or to install the competent in positions of power. The further question is what role education can or should play within an epistocratic account. It is possible to hold the view that epistocratic theory should solely be concerned with the problem of political power, and refrain from making statements about education: This is not to say that education is irrelevant, but that epistocratic arguments such as Brennan’s can be made without considering educational questions.

Even if this is acknowledged, it still makes sense to consider possible epistocratic approaches to education. It might be argued that the hopes that Enlightenment philosophy had in education were overblown. This means that education cannot be the remedy for political incompetence. Alternatively, it might be assumed, that epistocratic theory should be strongly concerned with education. In this view, then, the demand for education and the idea that the competent should be in power can and should go hand in hand. Both Plato and Mill seem to have been adherent of this latter view. But let us consider the possible scepticism regarding education as a remedy for incompetence.

⁵ Brennan also mentions the antiauthority tenet in his book (Brennan, 2016, p. 17), but only in the first chapter, not in the formulation of his core argument for epistocracy in chapter 6.

First, it could simply be stated that current educational systems in liberal democracies obviously do not bring about the kind of political competence that would be needed for democracy. The natural response to this is that if current education systems are unsatisfactory, they should be improved. The normative argument for better and more just forms of education is not undermined by the fact of existing deficiencies (see however Merry, 2018).

Second, it might be argued that democratic education does not accidentally fail, but that it is virtually impossible to create competent citizens through education. This basic idea can be spelled out in various ways. Maybe, there are large groups in society (“hobbits”) that cannot be reached by political education, because they are utterly disinterested in what goes on in the broader world around them. In a more sophisticated way, it might be argued that the incentives to become politically qualified are extremely weak, in contrast for instance to the incentives to acquire those capacities necessary to enter the labour market and make a living. As Brennan (2016, p. 35) argues, referring to rational choice theory, being politically competent and informed is costly for the individual, and usually does not bring about direct benefits. After all, in most situations, a single voter has no chance of changing the outcome of a vote. This might be seen as one reason why political education, even at its best, does not motivate people to become politically informed or engaged.

A third point is that many of the factors that can distort processes of decision-making do not seem to be directly linked to education. Consider, as a first example, what is known as confirmation bias – people tend to accept evidence that supports the views they already have (Brennan, 2016, p. 43). While some people are probably more biased in this regard than others, it is not clear that the well-educated can fully avoid this kind of distortion. The same goes for “in-group/out group” bias (Brennan, 2016, p. 39), that is, the bias to assume that members of our own group have predominantly positive traits, while thinking negatively about members of the other group. These effects become especially important in a highly polarized political environment where deficiencies in members of one’s own team are systematically overlooked, and achievements of the other group dismissed. So, if these and other biases cannot be remedied by educating people, why should we set our hopes in education?

While considerations of this kind might be put forward by defenders of an epistocracy against the education-oriented solution to the problem of political incompetence, adherents of epistocratic models themselves must acknowledge that education is crucial to their own account. This is why the points just mentioned come back to haunt them: After all, if the educated should rule, someone has to be educated.

First, if the current education system is broken, there is the question of how an epistocratic education might be facilitated, given the epistocratic need for knowledge. Should

we assume that the social inequalities in our education systems do not matter in epistocratic terms, because in any system, there are high-quality (private) schools from which the epistocratic elites can spring?

Second, if there is no inclination to become politically competent and informed, then why should there be enough qualified people to participate in an epistocratic system? The only type of epistocracy that seems imaginable under these circumstances is the rule of a small group of experts.

Third, if education cannot root out those biases that tend to distort political decision-making, why should those who are allowed to participate in epistocratic processes be free of them? For instance, we might expect them to have group-related biases preferring their own group (the educated elite) to the uneducated.

Given the importance of education in an epistocracy, it makes sense to further discuss how an epistocratic education system might look like. I first focus on the aspect of (educational) justice (6) and go on to ask how inequalities in education might affect the legitimacy of the political order (7).

6 Epistocracy and education – justice-related concerns

We can distinguish two kinds of epistocratic approaches. A first argument states that those with more competence or knowledge should have authority over the others (the ‘authority tenet’), the other line of thought excludes the incompetent from authority (the ‘anti-authority tenet’). These two approaches might be connected with various epistocratic models – I would like to focus on two of them, a system of plural votes and a model that denies political authority to some people on the basis of a threshold conception of political competence.

With regard to both of these models, we can expect educational inequalities – which might be characterized as forms of educational *injustice* – to lead to inequalities in the access to political authority. The debate about epistocracy is primarily concerned with legitimacy (not justice). The question is, then, whether educational inequalities are to be discussed exclusively in justice-related terms, or also in relation to the issue of political legitimacy: Can educational inequalities undermine the legitimacy of the *epistocratic* order?

Before I turn to this question, I focus on the problem of educational justice itself. I assume, that epistocratic models – if they are defended today – are embedded in a framework of liberal justice within which certain forms of educational inequality are seen as unacceptable. In the debate on educational justice, it is often assumed that education is instrumental in the pursuit of non-educational rewards, such as good jobs. It is claimed – for instance – that persons should have fair or equal opportunities in the competition for these rewards. In the epistocratic framework, access to political

authority to some extent depends on education. It seems natural to claim than everyone should have fair access to the kind of education necessary to gain political authority.

What this means is easy to elucidate within a model that excludes the incompetent from political power. Consider Brennan's account which seems similar to common democratic approaches in that it sets up a threshold level of competence that citizens have to reach in order to be granted political rights. It is not fully clear what kinds of capacities – or what level in the development these capacities – are required for this: A threshold level of competence could be defined in a way that only the best educated would be able reach it. In this case, the epistocratic threshold would strongly differ from Christiano's minimal account that is designed to include all or most of the adults in the democratic process. Brennan endorses what he calls a "moderate" conception of competence: This means – among other things – that voters "should evaluate information in a moderately rational, unbiased way— if not with the perfection of a vulcan, at least with the degree of rationality a first- year college student brings to thinking about introductory organic chemistry" (Brennan, 2016, p. 165). Here, Brennan provides a rough characterization of the educational level he has in mind ("moderately rational, unbiased"), and then mentions a specific point in a person's educational career, namely the first year of college. In the US context, this means that a student has been going to school for twelve years, has graduated from high school und got into college. This sets a relatively high bar for political competence, given that many people in the United States never go to college. While it is clear that the required level of rationality might be developed by people who never graduate from high school, it nevertheless makes sense to claim – from the perspective of justice – that individuals should have an education 'adequate' to the aim of political competence.

On the one hand, this claim for an adequate education is independent from the competence-based argument put forward by Brennan. On the other hand, however, defenders of epistocracy who are concerned about justice might endorse the claim for an adequate education, in line with common democratic demands for adequacy.

Now if the education system is just in the sense of adequacy, this does not invalidate the epistocratic argument, but the argument seems to lose its point: If an adequate education is ensured to all, virtually no one will be excluded from voting due to a lack of competence. Under non-ideal circumstances, then, the conditions of access to political authority are unjust, under ideal circumstances, we have a (quasi-)democratic system.

Let us now see what this means for the second type of system mentioned earlier, a system of plural votes: Here too, inequalities of education affect persons' access to political power. It seems that in this regard, a threshold level of minimal or moderate

competence is not sufficient: According to a system of plural votes, more competence (and a better education) can provide you with more votes, that is, more power. This means that the education system, in order to be just, must ensure every individual a fair opportunity to the kind of education that would grant them the highest number of votes provided by the system. This basic idea might be spelled out in various ways: It will probably be assumed that in this kind of system, not everyone will (or can) reach the highest level. That is why it must be clarified which kinds of inequalities are to be seen as morally acceptable, and which not: For instance, some would say that differences in the natural assets of persons, and/or their willingness to make an effort justify educational inequalities (Brighouse & Swift, 2008). In this essay, I do not want to get into the details of the debate on educational justice, but highlight one basic idea: Under unjust educational conditions, access to political authority is unjust, in the epistocratic system. This makes the system itself unjust – but not necessarily illegitimate. In contrast to the first model, educational justice will not lead to quasi-democratic conditions, because it is unlikely that all persons will reach the highest level of competence.

7 Epistocracy and education – justice and legitimacy

The conditions of access to political power might be seen as just or unjust – the further question is whether some form of (educational) inequality or injustice undermines the legitimacy of the epistocratic political system.

It seems obvious that epistocratic legitimacy is – generally speaking – linked to competence and education: In a society where virtually no one is well-educated, it will not be possible to find competent rulers. In Brennan's threshold model, no one will have political authority if no one meets the basic standard of competence. However, this is not a realistic prospect in our societies where there will be educational opportunities for some social groups even if the state should refrain from entertaining a public education system. The crucial question is whether educational *inequalities* undermine *epistocratic* legitimacy.

A first line of thought that comes naturally is that some forms of educational injustice – such as the failure to provide an adequate education for all – threaten political legitimacy in that they exclude certain persons or groups from political power. This line of argument, however, presupposes some notion of political equality that does not seem to fit within the epistocratic framework. The epistocratic rule of the knowers is based on the idea that political equality – in the sense of equal opportunities for political participation – does not matter by itself. The whole point of the epistocratic approach is that the lack of equality in this regard does not undermine legitimacy. Rather, allowing the incompetent to participate poses a legitimacy problem, as for instance Bren-

nan's competence principle states. Connecting legitimacy with equality is, then, a specifically *democratic* idea. In democratic terms, we might argue that the use of political power is illegitimate if some citizens are formally or effectively excluded from the political process.

Within the epistocratic framework, political legitimacy is tied to epistemic standards of correctness. Legitimacy is undermined, then, if political decisions (or the process of decision-making) are epistemically flawed and lead to epistemically flawed outcomes. Brennan's competence argument is set up to avoid at least the worst epistemic failures by excluding the incompetent from the process, other accounts might be more demanding, in that they rely on a notion of objective correctness. Anyway, we might assume that any political decision-making process that does not aim for correct outcomes is problematic, from an epistocratic point of view. At this point, one of the classical pro-democratic (and anti-epistocratic) arguments comes to mind.

John Dewey criticises Plato's separation of the populace into three social classes that goes along with a model of the individual human being as containing three distinct faculties:

There being no recognition that each individual constitutes his own class, there could be no recognition of the infinite diversity of active tendencies and combinations of tendencies of which an individual is capable. There were only three types of faculties or powers in the individual's constitution. Hence education would soon reach a static limit in each class, for only diversity make change and progress. (Dewey, 1980, p. 96)

This focus on the diversity of individuals and the interaction and exchange among them (Dewey, 1980, p. 93) is relevant, for Dewey, both with regards to individual development and social and political progress. On the one hand, democratic interaction of diverse individuals promotes individual growth as each person constantly experiences a variety of thoughts and behaviours. On the other hand, diversity sets free what Elizabeth Anderson – referring to Dewey – calls “the epistemic powers of democracy” (2006, p. 15). As Anderson explains, Dewey conceives of democracy as a collective “experimentalist” (ibid., p. 9) process akin to scientific inquiry where various views and claims are brought in from all sides, and are tested and developed in public deliberation. In this perspective, democracy is considered as epistemically superior to other social forms of life because it can take up and process all kinds of knowledge, including the knowledge stemming from the experiences and perspectives of those disadvantaged in society.

This line of thought is to be read as a refutation of epistocracy, including in its liberal forms: It states that epistocracy is *epistemically* flawed – and that the best epistemic outcomes are to be reached in the democratic process. I would like to propose a different

reading of the argument though, one that focusses on the role of education and educational justice: My point is that it might not matter in epistemic terms if some people are excluded from political power (or some have more power than others) if only the education system provides fair opportunities for people from all social groups. If people from different backgrounds exercise political power, the epistemic flaws of epistocracy might be overcome.

An elaborate version of this line of argument is – surprisingly – to be found in the work of Elizabeth Anderson who is an ardent defender of democracy. Anderson acknowledges that even under the condition of what she calls democratic equality, there will be “elites”, that is, persons “in positions of responsibility and leadership” (Anderson 2007, p. 596). Her account of democratic elite education starts from the claim that elites must be responsive to the needs and interests of everyone in society, including the members of disadvantaged groups. For her, this is primarily an *epistemic* issue: As she points out, having (“third-personal”, “propositional”, “disengaged”) academic knowledge is not enough to gain an understanding of social problems. It takes knowledge that is tied to the first-person and second-person perspective. Also, one must know persons, not just propositions, and have “practically engaged” kinds of knowledge (ibid., pp. 607–608). As Anderson diagnoses, elites in our societies often lack some of these forms of knowledge and have “cognitive deficits” (ibid., p. 606). In her view, these epistemic deficiencies mainly stem from two factors, social segregation and negative stereotypes: The segregation of social groups has the effect that privileged individuals lack relevant knowledge about how it is to live as someone in a disadvantaged social position. Negative stereotypes distort the views that members of different groups have of each other. As a remedy, Anderson proposes to set up an integrated education system where young people from different walks of life meet and learn to interact with each other. In this personal exchange – she assumes – individuals can learn from each other and gain the knowledge relevant for decision-making in elite positions. For one, she thinks that this is the way that socially privileged students become knowledgeable about the life of the disadvantaged and can possibly overcome their stereotypical attitudes towards them. Furthermore, she claims that members of disadvantaged groups themselves should have effective access to elite positions. In this way, they can bring their first-hand knowledge about what it means to be socially disadvantaged into the political process.

All this can be considered as part of a *democratic* conception of education – as intended by Anderson. However, we might use a similar line of thought in the epistocratic context – in order to address the Deweyan critique of epistocracy: Establishing an inclusive education system that brings people from all walks of life into political power epistemically improves the political decision-making process. To the extent that political

legitimacy hinges on epistemic correctness, the problem of legitimacy arising from the exclusion of certain groups can be solved on the educational level, without granting political rights to all. Inequalities of political authority might then be justified – under the condition that a just education system allows all forms of knowledge and experience to flow into the political decision-making process and thereby improves its epistemic outcome.

This means that a quasi-democratic education system can help ensure the legitimacy of epistocracy. It can be pointed out that according to this line of thought, the issue of education *is* relevant for *epistocratic* legitimacy: Excluding some individuals or groups from education undermines the legitimacy of the epistocratic system to the extent that it leads to epistemic deficits in the decision-making process.

8 Education as the remedy?

On the one hand, education (or educational justice) can be seen as a precondition for *democratic* legitimacy: Education – as the remedy for political incompetence – is necessary to establish conditions of political equality and improve the epistemic quality of the democratic process.

On the other hand, education also plays a crucial role within the *epistocratic* framework: Some forms of educational injustice lead to unjust conditions in the access to political authority. Given a threshold conception of epistocracy, it can be said that under the condition of educational justice (understood in the sense of adequacy), the epistocratic system practically becomes a democracy – as virtually everybody has the right to vote. Here, then, educational justice is the remedy for political exclusion. Persons become political equals due to the demands of educational adequacy, even if equality is not considered as a pre-given value. According to the most plausible epistocratic argument (Brennan's competence argument), then, the epistocratic order practically turns into a democracy, if the education system is just. This is not the case in an epistocratic system that provides plural votes to the more competent voters: Here, political inequalities are likely to stay in place under the condition of educational justice.

Educational inequalities make the epistocratic system unjust – do they also threaten its legitimacy? In a Deweyan spirit, it might be argued that the exclusion of some social groups from the political process is epistemically damaging. As I have argued, this problem might be solved by establishing an inclusive education system – without ensuring political equality. Still, it must be acknowledged that failing to make the education system inclusive also undermines epistocratic legitimacy: It might be said, then, that the legitimacy of an epistocracy depends on a quasi-democratic education system.

- Anderson, Elizabeth (2006). The Epistemology of Democracy. *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology* 3(1), 8–22.
- Anderson, Elizabeth (2007). Fair Opportunity in Education: A Democratic Equality Perspective. *Ethics*, 117(4), 595–622.
- Brennan, Jason (2011). The Right to a Competent Electorate. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 61(245), 700–724.
- Brennan, Jason (2016). *Against Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Brighouse, Harry & Swift, Adam (2008). Putting Educational Equality in its Place. *Education Finance and Policy*, 3(4), 444–466.
- Christiano, Thomas (2008). *The Constitution of Equality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dewey, John (1980). Democracy and Education (1916). In Jo Ann Boydston (ed.), *The Middle Works*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Estlund, David (2008): *Democratic Authority. A Philosophical Framework*. Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Gutmann, Amy (1987). *Democratic Education*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gutmann, Amy & Thompson, Dennis (2004). *Why Deliberative Democracy?* Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Merry, Michael S. (2018). Citizenship, Structural Inequality and the Political Elite. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, 1(1). doi: 10.17899/on_ed.2018.1.1
- Mill, John Stuart (1977). Thoughts on Parliamentary Reform (1859). In John M. Robson (ed.), *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, Vol. 19 (pp. 311–339). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Peter, Fabienne (2009). *Democratic Legitimacy*. New York: Routledge.
- Peter, Fabienne (2016). The Epistemology of Deliberative Democracy. In Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen, Kimberley Brownless & David Coady (eds.), *A Companion to Applied Philosophy* (pp. 76–88). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Pettit, Philip (2012). Legitimacy and Justice in Republican Perspective. *Current Legal Problems*, 65, 59–82.
- Plato (2000). *The Republic*. Ed. by G.R.F. Ferrari, trans. by Tom Griffith. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rawls, John (1993). *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Satz, Debra (2007). Equality, Adequacy, and Education for Citizenship. *Ethics*, 117(4), 623–648.
- Schouten, Gina (2018). Political Liberalism and Autonomy Education: Are Citizenship-based Arguments Enough? *Philosophical Studies*, 175(5), 1071–1093.
- Sen, Amartya 1999. *Development as Freedom*. New York: Knopf.