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## **Is Universal Suffrage Overrated?**

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# Introduction

Are citizens prepared for the responsibilities of being politically informed required by universal suffrage? We initially wanted to propose a thesis about the current crisis of democratic regimes and the consequent mistrust and anger that arisen towards a system of government that has, despite its weakness produced a stable economic growth for decades, exponentially increased its citizens quality of life and guaranteed durable peace. The problem is that citizens seem to dangerously take it for granted and to some, considering that average citizens lack political competence and knowledge, an oligarchy or a rule by the elites would be deemed preferable.

Indeed, when we started to discuss the subject with some friends and acquaintances, we received an interesting feedback on why democracies were failing, that is: Universal suffrage is overrated. They argued that citizens were on average politically ignorant, easily influenced, unable to understand the complexity of political issues and therefore unsuited for the responsibilities imposed on them by universal suffrage. The increase in information available did not result in enlightened civic participation but rather in more noise, confusion and partisanship. They also eloquently pointed to the paradox that you would not board a plane knowing that the pilot is incapable of flying a plane, but democracies have no problem in letting unqualified citizens vote. Some others, pointed to the fact that citizens are different in intelligence, competence and knowledge but they all share the same number of votes. They once again pointed out to another paradox: if you are sick, you would not give the same weight to the opinion of a friend with no medical training than to a doctor; but this is exactly what happens in democracy: the vote of a Nobel Prize Winner counts as the vote of any uneducated citizen. For these reasons, they believed, democracies are not maximizing expected utility. Honestly, these two paradoxes seemed emotionally wrong -because universal suffrage is indispensable to democracy and therefore abolishing the concept of universal right to vote amount to invalidate democracy- but dangerously intriguing and therefore we felt they deserved to be deepened.

Probably without them knowing, they have touched on one of the most important political philosophy debates that has been going on since ancient Greek philosopher Plato. For Walter Lippmann (1889-1974) for example, the question was whether “it is possible for men to find a way of acting effectively upon highly complex affairs by very simple means.”<sup>1</sup> Lippmann focused precisely on whether the average citizen possess enough information to choose intelligently and believed that there is no vision of democracy worth defending if citizens do not possess a minimum of political competence.

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<sup>1</sup> Lippmann, W (1925) “The Phantom Public”. Transaction Publishers

Recently the debate was reinvigorated by the current crisis of democratic representation and by an interesting book written by Professor Jason Brennan (2016) called “Against Democracy”.<sup>2</sup> In his work, Brennan presents the idea of rethinking universal suffrage and the concept of Egalitarianism in politics. This new system would be based on the rule of the knowers and called Epistocracy. According to this new form of government, voting rights should be granted only to those who possess enough knowledge to make thoughtful decisions and presumably, this form of government should produce better political outcomes than democracy. Reckless voting may result in disastrous policies, equally and therefore unjustly paid by all members of society. We should never underestimate the importance of voting and remember that two of history’s worst dictators: Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini, were popularly elected. Brennan also believes that the act of voting involves an imposition of one’s will on others, and that such a right should not be granted without requirements. This thesis is a direct response to the arguments we have heard some of our friends make, to those who advocate an epistocratic government and in general to all those who believe universal suffrage is overrated.

Democracies are now experimenting a deep representation crisis: in the last four years, Spain voted four times. In Germany, der Große Koalition falters. France protests against Macron and Israel, the only Middle East democracy voted for the third election in less than one year. Democracies are being crushed under the weight of three crisis: Economic, Migratory and the crisis of the European Union construction. Citizens seem to be tired of democracy, the responsibilities it involves and would abandon themselves to a “strong man”. Extreme right parties have increased their consensus in almost all western democracies. In China, President Xi Jinping writes in the journal controlled by the Party, Qiushi: “From ancient times to the present, whenever great powers have collapsed or decayed, a common cause has been the loss of central authority.”<sup>3</sup> In Brazil, President Bolsonaro praises military dictatorships, in Turkey President Erdogan re-established Sharia law clashing with progressive cities such as Istanbul. United States President Trump provokes “When I will be elected for a third or fourth time”, despite the fact that the Constitution explicitly prohibits it and Russian President Vladimir Putin is preparing a new constitutional reform. In Italy, a country devastated by fascism less than 3 generations ago: according to the 53 Censis report on the Italian social situation, 76% of citizens says

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<sup>2</sup> Brennan, J. (2016) “Against Democracy” Princeton University Press

<sup>3</sup> Buckley, C. (2019) “As China’s Troubles Simmer, Xi Reinforces His Political Firewall”. The New York Times. Available Online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/28/world/asia/china-xi-jinping-communist-party-plenum.html>

that they do not trust political parties, which are essential to representative democracies, and 48,2% of Italians would want the return of “a strong man in power”.<sup>4</sup>

This dissatisfaction with democracy is evident in the decline of voter’s participation. According to the World Bank, over the last 25 years, the average global voter turnout has decreased by more than 10%.<sup>5</sup> In 2019 Spain, Greece and Portugal all had legislative elections and their turnout were respectively 69.8%,<sup>6</sup> 57,9%<sup>7</sup> and 48.6%<sup>8</sup>. France last parliamentary elections held in 2017 saw an all-time low of 48.7%<sup>9</sup>. In the United States, only 61.4%<sup>10</sup> of citizens voted in the last Presidential election while midterm turnout results are usually even lower ranging from a century record of 49.3% reached in 2018 and a low of 36,7% in 2014.<sup>11</sup> This sharp decrease in participation has been termed by David Van Reybrouck as “democratic fatigue syndrome” and is a major blow to democracy health.

Universal suffrage is indispensable to democracy and therefore criticizing this right results in an attack against democracy. Before getting in the dept of the argument, it is indispensable to firstly

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<sup>4</sup> Castellano, E. (2019) “Un italiano su due vuole l’uomo forte al potere”. Agenzia Italia

Available Online at: [https://www.agi.it/cronaca/censis\\_politica\\_uomo\\_forte\\_democrazia-6689183/news/2019-12-06/](https://www.agi.it/cronaca/censis_politica_uomo_forte_democrazia-6689183/news/2019-12-06/)

<sup>5</sup> The World Bank (2017) “World Development Report 2017”. The World Bank

Available Online at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2017>

<sup>6</sup> Ministerio del Interior, Gobierno de España: Re Resultados Congreso, Total nacional.

Available Online at: <https://resultados.10noviembre2019.es/Congreso/Total-nacional/0/es>

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Interior: National Elections- July 2019

Available Online at: <https://ekloges.yves.gr/current/v/home/en/parties/>

<sup>8</sup> Diário da República- Comissão Nacional De Eleições

Available Online at: [http://www.cne.pt/sites/default/files/dl/2019ar\\_mapa\\_oficial\\_resultados.pdf](http://www.cne.pt/sites/default/files/dl/2019ar_mapa_oficial_resultados.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Worley, W. (2017) “French election turnout worst in modern history as Emmanuel Macron Heads for landslide victory in parliament” Independent

Available Online at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/french-election-turnout-emmanuel-macron-parliament-france-victory-fn-marine-le-pen-national-front-a7785366.html>

<sup>10</sup> File, T. (2017): “Voting in America: A Look at the 2016 Presidential Election”

Available Online at: [https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2017/05/voting\\_in\\_america.html](https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2017/05/voting_in_america.html)

<sup>11</sup> Stewart, E. (2018) “”2018’s record-setting voter turnout, in one chart” Vox

Available Online at: <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/11/19/18103110/2018-midterm-elections-turnout>

try to define what democracy is and secondly elaborate on the link between universal suffrage and democracy.

The term democracy comes from the Greek “Demos” and “Kratus”, which can be translated into “Common people” and “rule”.<sup>12</sup> Democracy is therefore the rule of the people and first appeared in Athens in the sixth Century Before Christ and is in sharp contrast with monarchies and dictatorships. There have been different forms of democracies throughout history as brilliantly explained by professor David Held (1987) in “Models of Democracy”.<sup>13</sup> Held points out that there are two striking historical facts: the first one is that political leaders and political regimes of extraordinarily divergence profess to be democratic; the second regards the fragility of the system as highlighted by the turbulent succession of regimes in Europe in the 20 century. The term “rule by the people” can appear to be an ambiguous concept and we should differentiate between direct and indirect rule. Direct democracy is a type of government where the people directly govern. The system involves wide participation of citizens which are directly required to make decisions first hand. The Athenian democracy is an example where all citizens could participate in the Ecclesia, the principal assembly. Modern democracies are rather representative democracies and recognize the supremacy of Parliament over the other institutions. This system of government is indirect because citizens elect representatives who govern and legislate. Only on some rare occasions, precisely when referendums are held, people can directly legislate. Giving these assorted interpretations, there is no consensus description of what democracy is. Definitions have ranged from narrow characteristics such as regimes with free and fair elections to broader interpretations including the right to free elections, independent judiciary and media, and protection of civil rights.<sup>14</sup> Political scientist Larry Diamond (2004) describes democratic regimes with these key four distinguishing attributes:

- ‘i) A system for choosing and replacing the government through free and fair elections;
- ii) Active participation of the people, as citizens, in politics and civic life;
- iii) Protection of the human rights of all citizens;
- iv) A rule of law in which the laws and procedures apply equally to all citizens.’<sup>15</sup>

Dahl, Shapiro, Cheibib (2003) enrich the debate introducing the concept of universal suffrage and

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<sup>12</sup> Online Etymology Dictionary: “Democracy”

Available Online at: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/democracy>

<sup>13</sup> Held, D. (1987) “Models of Democracy”. Stanford University Press

<sup>14</sup> Shin, D. (2012) “Is Democracy Emerging as a Universal Value? A Contrarian Perspective”. Asian Barometer  
Available Online at: <http://www.globalbarometers.org/publications//6c99daf3e1cbe36aed521c9ee0c4747d.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Diamond, L. (2004): “What is Democracy?”. Stanford University

the freedom of eligibility.<sup>16</sup> According to the Collins Dictionary, universal suffrage can be defined as the right for all adult citizens to vote without discriminations on wealth, income, gender, social status, race, or ethnicity.<sup>17</sup> All adult citizens therefore have equal voting weight. Minor exceptions to this rule may apply, known as disfranchisement and must, usually, be carried out by a court of law following serious criminal offenses. Held (1987) believes that there are four classical conception of democracies, which are: Athenian classical democracy, the republican model, the liberal democracies and the Marxist model; but also recognizes that new variations have recently emerged and enriched the debate.<sup>18</sup> While for John Dewey, democracy is much more than a political form of government: “The political and governmental phase of democracy is a means for realizing ends that lie in the wide domain of human relationships and the development of human personality”, and “The key-note of democracy as a way of life may be expressed, it seems to me, as the necessity for the participation of every mature human being in formation of the values that regulate the living of men together: which is necessary from the standpoint of both the general social welfare and the full development of human beings as individuals.”<sup>19</sup>

Democracy is therefore the “rule of the people” but there have been nonetheless several attempts to restrict the meaning of “people”. We often today take for granted universal suffrage and equal voting weight neglecting that they are relatively new rights, even in democratic countries. In Italy for example, my home country, full universal suffrage was granted in 1945. This means that my great grandmother, who died in 1958 did not have the right to vote for most of her life. Indeed, examining the history of democratic development we find that the link between democracy and universal suffrage is not as straightforward as one would initially think. Democracy dates back to ancient Athens in the sixth century BC and all Athenian citizens were allowed to freely vote and speak in the legislative assembly. Such privileges did not however extend to women and slaves. Rome also significantly contributed to the development of democracy and the Roman Senate dates back to the foundation of the city in 753 BC. While the Senate was an institutional innovation and Romans were particularly enlightened for their time, their system of government would today not be considered fair and democratic because only a minority of roman citizens were allowed to participate and the weight of votes was pondered, favouring wealthy and noble families.

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<sup>16</sup> Dahl, R., Shapiro, I., Cheibub (2003): “The Democracy Sourcebook”. MIT Press.

<sup>17</sup> Collins dictionary: “Universal suffrage”

Available Online at: "Universal suffrage definition and meaning | Collins English Dictionary"

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 13

<sup>19</sup> Dewey, J. (1937) “Democracy and Educational Administration”. Scholl and Society

Throughout the first modern democracy and until the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789), voting rights were generally restricted to property owners, favouring white rich males. The French Declaration developed the concept that all “Men are born and remain free and equal in rights”<sup>20</sup> and with the 1793 French Constitution such principle was extended (although did not come into practice until the Second French Republic 1848) to include also the right to vote for all adult males. The 19th century saw the extension of male universal suffrage to most Western countries, while such right was granted to women only in the following century.

The end of the two World Wars was usually a turning point for the acquisition of full universal suffrage, and as stated by Fabbrini (2010) “equality in the grave preceded equality in the voting polls.”<sup>21</sup> As previously mentioned, Italy accorded full universal suffrage in 1945 and France in 1944 but other countries such as Greece (1952), Switzerland (1971) or even Portugal (1974) had to wait many more years. Voting rights were granted to women, but racial and ethnic discriminations continued to play a fundamental role in countries such as the United States, where black women gained the right to vote only in 1965, or in South Africa where black people could not vote until 1994. Therefore, the battle for the equal voting rights was a very difficult and long process.

People who are sceptical about outcomes produced by universal suffrage are therefore also sceptical about democracy but would be in good company. Indeed, it really impressed me to see that many of the greatest minds from the ancient Greek philosophers to the 20th century political intellectuals, were sceptical of democracy and its egalitarianism conception of universal suffrage. All critics seem to point out that the average citizen is unsuited and not prepared for the responsibilities imposed by democracy. Indeed, by voting, citizens directly influence the outcome of elections and therefore governmental policies.

One of the first philosophers to oppose democracy was Plato which also reports the thoughts of his teacher: Socrates, who famously did not leave behind any written documents. Plato forcefully criticized Greek democracy by writing in his “Republic”: “foolish leaders of Democracy, which is a charming form of government, full of variety and disorder, and dispensing a sort of equality to equals and unequalled alike.”<sup>22</sup> For Plato, democracy is a stage in the decline of the ideal state so bad that

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<sup>20</sup> Declaration of Human and Civic Rights, August 26 1789

Available Online at: [https://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/sites/default/files/as/root/bank\\_mm/anglais/cst2.pdf](https://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/sites/default/files/as/root/bank_mm/anglais/cst2.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Fabbrini, S. (2010) “Compound Democracies: Why the United States and Europe Are Becoming Similar”.

OUP Oxford

<sup>22</sup> Plato (2007) “The Republic”. Penguin Classics



people will eventually seek a dictator in order to fix the mistakes made.<sup>23</sup> The philosopher made a distinction between freedom and anarchy, and according to him, democracies were anarchic societies which mistake anarchy for freedom. The system followed the people's emotional impulses and resulted in a rule of the fools.

Socrates was also suspicious of democracy and believed that voting is a skill that most citizens do not possess. In Plato's "Republic", while talking to a character named Adeimantus, Socrates asks who would you rather want as a captain of your ship, any man or a trained sailor? Socrates concludes that letting anyone vote would be irresponsible and have catastrophic results, just like it would be to let anyone pilot a ship.<sup>24</sup> The art of sailing and the art of government are skills that must be taught and therefore cannot be exercised by anyone. Socrates personally experienced the disastrous effects democracy may have when in 399 BC, he was put on trial and sentenced to death by a popular jury composed of 500 Athenians.

Enlightenment philosophers also opposed universal suffrage. John Locke (1632–1704) for example believed that of all the natural rights citizens possess, the right to property was the most important. The British philosopher favoured a system of representative government but believed that only property owners had the right to govern and vote. He thought that the main goal of government was to promote the public good, which mainly consists in protecting property rights. Locke was profoundly reluctant to allow for citizens who did not possess property to vote because he deemed them "unfit".

Charles Montesquieu (1689-1755) judged a separation of power system to be the best form of government: the executive, the legislative and the judiciary powers are separated but nonetheless exercise control over the others in order to prevent that one branch becomes too powerful. According to the French author, freedom is a requirement to participate in the political decision-making process. Children, women, uneducated citizens and non-property owners are not considered free and therefore excluded from political participation.

Voltaire (1694-1778), considered by many as the most influential supporter of the right to free speech, wrote to Catharine the Great of Russia: "Men are rarely worthy of governing themselves. Almost nothing great has ever been done in the world except by the genius and firmness of a single man combating the prejudices of the multitude".<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Hendricks, S. (2017) "Why Socrates Hated Democracy and What We Can Do About It

<https://bigthink.com/scotty-hendricks/why-socrates-hated-democracy-and-what-we-can-do-about-it>

<sup>24</sup> The Book of Life (2016) "Why Socrates Hated Democracy". The School of Life. Available Online at:

<https://www.theschooloflife.com/thebookoflife/why-socrates-hated-democracy/>

<sup>25</sup> Massie, R. K. (2012) "Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman" Random House Inc

German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) also believed that people who lacked economic freedom would have to be excluded from political participation. In the first English translation of all Kant's work on political and moral philosophy: "Practical Philosophy" edited by professors Gregor and Wood (1999), we find the following quote explaining Kant's philosophy on the right to vote: "Being fit to vote presupposes the independence of someone".<sup>26</sup> According to the philosopher, being independent is directly correlated to economic autonomy which derives from property ownership. The enlightenment philosophers theories had a profound impact on the form of government adopted after the American and French revolution and indeed, voting rights were allocated only to male property owners as previously mentioned in the thesis introduction.

It is interesting to note that James Madison (1751-1836), who is considered to be "the Father of the American Constitution" and who served as President of United States, also -to some extent- opposed democracy. Especially in the United States, the argument that Madison disliked democracy is frequently used but is only partially true. The Father of the American Constitution criticised direct democracies believing them to be "spectacles of turbulence and contention" but favoured a republic in which citizens elect a small number of representatives who then legislate. Madison therefore opposed direct involvement of citizens but praised a representative form of democracy.<sup>27</sup> Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) thought that the fundamental task of government was to regulate, oversight and if necessary, intervene. The German philosopher rejected universal suffrage because the masses lacked the political education necessary to be directly involved and also believed that direct suffrage would lead to apathy and electoral indifference. Hegel disapproved of both democracy and tyranny but preferred monarchy as the best form of political authority to provide strong central government combined with a system of indirect representation.<sup>28</sup>

It is historically well known that Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) despise Hegel and the two seem to disagree on almost everything, except for the fact that both opposed democracy and universal suffrage. Nietzsche was disappointed with the average man because he was enslaved by his desires. Average men are unable to "rise above" their impulses and calculate "long-term self-interest", fundamental to administer a State.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Gregor, M. J. & Wood, A. W. (1999) "Practical Philosophy". Cambridge University Press

<sup>27</sup> McMaken, R. (2017) "Why James Madison Hated Democracy". Mises Wire

Available Online at: <https://mises.org/wire/why-james-madison-hated-democracy>

<sup>28</sup> Duquette, D. A. "Hegel: Social and Political Thought". Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy

Available Online at: <https://www.iep.utm.edu/hegelsoc/>

<sup>29</sup> Nietzsche, F. (1886) "Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future". Leipzig

British philosopher and economist John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) argued that institutions must recognize that some citizens opinions are worth more and advocates for a plural voting system.<sup>30</sup> Mill believes that the dangers of democratic governments might be reduced to general ignorance and insufficient mental qualifications. Mill is a fundamental epistocratic author and deserves a more detailed analysis that will be provided in the second chapter about epistocracy.

Joseph Schumpeter (1883-1950) was also sceptical of democracy because “the typical citizen drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field. He argues and analyses in a way which he would readily recognize as infantile within the sphere of his real interests. He becomes a primitive again.”<sup>31</sup> According to the Austrian economists, the claim that democracy serves and represents the common will of the people is illusory; he believed on the contrary that citizens are manipulated by political leaders. He also argued that there is no such thing as a common will, a common good nor that citizens exercise influence on parliament. According to the author, the system is ruled by leader who impose their policies and democracy has no value per se and its only function is to select leaders through competition. Schumpeter idea that there is no common will of the people derives from Gustave Lebon (1841-1931) concept of “madness of the crowds”. The French sociologist developed the view that crowds cannot be considered the sum of people individuality that rather that when people aggregate in a common group, they abandon their values, beliefs and opinions giving birth to a “racial unconscious” that creates a new psychological entity.<sup>32</sup>

American writer and political commentator Walter Lippmann (1889-1974) published in 1922 “Public Opinion”.<sup>33</sup> The book was widely acclaimed and John Dewey, perhaps the greatest defender of democracy, defined it as “the most effective indictment of democracy as currently conceived.” According to Lippmann, citizens are unable to achieve basic knowledge of public affairs and consequently make reasonable choices. The complexity of the political life at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century made the average citizen incapable of understanding the complexity of the environment, making it even harder to distinguish between facts and opinions. Indeed, the increase in information availability did not improve citizens decision making capabilities. It rather leads to more noise and more ignorance. According to the author, democracy rests on the false ideal that citizens are naturally inclined toward political action or at least can be educated to it.

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<sup>30</sup> Mill J.S. (1977) *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, Vol 19. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

<sup>31</sup> Schumpeter J. A. (2003) “Capitalism socialism and democracy”. London: Routledge

<sup>32</sup> *The Crowd: A study of the Popular Mind*. Gustave Le Bon. 1841 [1931] Dover Publications,

<sup>33</sup> Lippmann, W. (1922) “Public Opinion”. Harcourt, Brace & Co.

Recently Jason Brennan wrote an important book, which will be widely cited, called “against democracy” and favoured the adoption of an epistocratic form of government.<sup>34</sup>

It is shocking to see that almost all of the greatest philosophical minds history has produced, to some extent oppose democracy and universal suffrage. It is important to contextualize the writings of these authors in their time. For example, even though the enlightenment philosopher opposed universal suffrage, they introduced democratic values and institutions in a world ruled by absolutism. Their ideas for the time were innovative and permitted fundamental steps forward for mankind. It is also important to note that most of the criticism presented in the above section is raised against direct democracy while today’s democracies are representatives. Although the system is different, the objections raised on whether citizens are prepared for the responsibilities imposed by universal suffrage, and the problem of properly educating voters, are still relevant. The debate on the link between education and vote was recently reinvigorated by a controversial statement made by Labour member of Parliament Barry Sheerman who claimed that the most educated voted to remain in the UK during the 2016 United Kingdom European Union membership referendum,<sup>35</sup> and by Jason Brennan book “Epistocracy” published in 2016.

The first chapter, called “Are citizens politically ignorant” will deal with the first question that must be answered before any other concept might be elaborate: Are Citizens Politically Ignorant? Sceptical about universal suffrage believe citizens do not fulfil their obligations to be politically informed, and that votes are rather irrational and influenced by cognitive biases. The problem therefore is not only access to information but also flaws in human cognition. In order to explain what cognitive biases are, the chapter will borrow many concepts from psychology.

After having established that average citizens are politically ignorant, the second chapter, entitled “Epistocracy” will present a drastic solution to the problem: surpass the concept of universal suffrage and create a “rule of the knowers”, known as Epistocracy. The system suggests that political outcomes would be drastically improved if only those who prove to be competent and possess enough

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 2

<sup>35</sup> Baynes, C. (2017) Brexit: Labour MP who said Remain voters were better educated 'has facts on his side', says former YouGov boss. Independent

Available Online at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-remain-voters-better-educated-labour-mp-barry-sheerman-huddersfield-yougov-facts-leave-a8027121.html>

knowledge on the subjects should have the right to vote. This could be achieved either by excluding the uneducated citizens from the voting process or by introducing a system of weighted votes.

The third chapter, titled “Universal suffrage is not overrated” will defend the vital importance of universal suffrage as a guarantee of the respect of fundamental human rights and critic epistocracy as an immoral elitist tyranny. The point is that democracy gives important responsibilities to its citizens who should be educated, but education is not enough to guarantee good governance. In order to avoid that democracy becomes a dictatorship of the majority, universal suffrage should be integrated by some elements.

The conclusion will briefly summarize the main points of the thesis and give our personal explanation to why democracies are in crisis. we will then conclude by saying that today’s main challenge is that of becoming a modern Tocqueville and identify the institutional check and balance that will permit the correct functioning of democracy even if some citizens are politically ignorant and finally, provide three possible solutions to improve the system.

# Chapter I: Are Citizens Politically Ignorant?

Democracies imposes rights but also duties on its citizens which are asked to participate in the political life of the state. Citizens have the right to vote but this implies the obligation of being correctly informed. Critics of the universal right to vote hold that most people enjoy this right without adhering to their responsibilities of being well informed leading them to make choices that do not maximize societal expected utility. In this chapter is descriptive of political ignorance.

All adult citizens have an equal say in the democratic decision-making process, although they differ in the level of education and knowledge. Some citizens are more educated and intelligent than others, but these characteristics do not count in the voting polls because all citizens have the same voting weight. Therefore, the votes of rational, informed citizens count the same as the ones of those uninformed and the vote of a Nobel Prize winner has the weight as the vote of an ignorant citizens. Caplan (2006)<sup>36</sup> explains the concepts of equal voting weight and “power to the people” from an historical perspective. Historically, western countries were ruled by absolute monarchies or dictatorships and policies were carried out in the interest of the ruler and not of the ruled. By creating a political system that gave power to the people and made everyone equal, the founding fathers hoped to abolish the divergence between the interests of the ruler and of the ruled. Policies would therefore be carried out according to the people’s interests and ultimately resulting in better outcomes.

In no other system of government citizens are required to make so many decisions as in democracies and this puts a lot of pressure on its citizens that are not always well prepared for the task. These inadequacies may result in citizens choosing outcomes that may go against their own interests.<sup>37</sup> This view is shared by many authors, including Caplan who talks in his book “The Myth of Rational Voter” about the “paradox of democracy” and states that: “in theory, democracy is a bulwark against socially harmful policies. In practice, however democracies frequently adopt and maintain policies that are damaging”. The author cites protectionism as an example of policies supported by citizens who eventually go against their own interests. Chong (2013), in the “Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology”, explains the importance of the electoral process saying that “if democratic government is to be by the people and for the people, the hands of a nation’s citizens must be on the country’s steering wheel. If this is true, and yet if most citizens are looking somewhere other than the

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<sup>36</sup> Caplan, B. (2006) “The Myth of Rational Voter”. Princeton University Press

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 37

road ahead most of the time while driving, the chances of disaster are far from minimal’’.<sup>38</sup> Electoral results are extremely important because they influence governmental policies. Therefore, a bad vote will lead to bad policies. We may fight useless and bloody wars; we might irresponsibly pollute the environment and various others disastrous outcome.

Although democracy may fail in maximizing its citizens expected utility, we should note that its failures pale in comparison to those of other political regimes. Democratic elections may give power to unprepared candidates but do not murder millions of their own citizens, do not oppress minorities, do not incarcerate dissidents. Nonetheless, the critic that citizen do not fulfil their obligation to be politically informed is still valid.

Several models have been developed in order to understand how individuals make decisions. The most famous one is an economic model called “Rational Choice theory” which dates back to the 18th century.<sup>39</sup> The theory assumption is that individuals use rational calculus in order to make rational choice most in line with their preferences and which maximize their expected utility. Today, we understand that emotions often play a greater role in influencing behaviours than pure rationality. Therefore, according to many psychologist, Ration Choice theory in practice fails. Indeed, the studies focus has rather shifted towards Behavioural Economics and Political Psychology which are dedicated to understanding political behaviour from a phycological perspective focusing on the cognitive processes that occur in the minds of the political agent. All of the most prominent researches in these fields of study, such Campdell (1960)<sup>40</sup>, Miller (1996)<sup>41</sup>, Lewis (2008)<sup>42</sup> agree that when making political decisions, citizens suffer from several psychological and cognitive biases, and recognize that citizens are not rational and fail to maximize their utility in decision making. Chong (2013) adds that “in studying the political psychology and behaviour of citizens, every facet of the rational choice model appears to be violated to some degree. People prefer policies and engage in behaviour such as voting that do not further their self-interest. Their preferences are often unstable, inconsistent and affected by how alternatives are framed. They do not always respond to new information by updating their beliefs and modifying their preferences in accord with their goals. They

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<sup>38</sup> Huddy, L; Sears, D; and Levy, J; (2013) “The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology (2 ed.). Oxford University Press

<sup>39</sup> Wright, J. P (2009) “Rational Choice Theories”. Oxford Bibliographies Online

<sup>40</sup> Campdel, A.; Converse, P.; Miller, W. E.; Stokes D. (1960) “The American Voter” Midway Reprint

<sup>41</sup> Miller, W. E.; Shanks, J. M. (1996) “The New American Voter” Harvard University Press

<sup>42</sup> Lewis-Beck, M. S; Jacoby, W. G.; Norpoth, H.; Weisberg, H. F (2008) “The American Voter Revisited” The University of Michigan Press

do not gather enough information to make the optimal choice.” Professors Rabin (1998),<sup>43</sup> Tversky & Thaler (1990)<sup>44</sup> and Gilovitch (1991)<sup>45</sup> also argue that citizens are not rational and fail to maximize their expected utility. According to Caplan, democracy fails in promoting what is best for its citizens because its citizens are “ignorant, irrational and embrace a long list of misconceptions”.<sup>46</sup>

Regarding political issues, there are usually various interpretations of the same subject which makes it even easier to fall trap to cognitive biases and harder to identify the best alternative. The problem therefore is not only access to information by also flaws in human cognition. We will later see in the chapter, what are the most common psychological biases citizens fall into but before dealing with this subject, we will first see that people not only process information incorrectly, they also do not possess it.

The first section (Political Ignorance) will be divided into two parts: the first (Lack of Political Knowledge) will show that average citizen often lacks the basic political knowledge, which makes it harder for them to identify the option that would maximize their expected utility. The second part (Rational Ignorance) will explain why some citizens are ignorant, introducing the concept of “Rational ignorance” and that the cost of voting is superior to its benefit.

The second section (Cognitive Biases) will deal with cognitive biases that may affect people’s decisions. The parts will be divided according to the biases which are “Big Five personality traits”, “Confirmation bias”, “Availability Bias”, “Peer pressure and Authority”, “Political Tribalism” and other biases such as “Bandwagon effect”, “Framing effect”, “Candidate’s name order” and “Candidate’s appearance”).

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<sup>43</sup> Rabin, M. (1998) “Psychology and Economics”. *Journal of Economic Literature*

<sup>44</sup> Tversky, A. & Thaler, R. H. (1990) “Anomalies: Preference reversals.” *Journal of Economic Perspectives*

<sup>45</sup> Gilovitch, T. (1991) “How we know what isn’t so: The fallibility of human reason in everyday life.” New York: Free Press

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 40



# I. Political Ignorance

## I.I Lack of Political Knowledge

Political ignorance is well-documented by surveys carried out on general political knowledge.<sup>47</sup> Political theorist Jeffrey Friedman believes that “the public is far more ignorant than academic and journalistic observers of the public realize”<sup>48</sup> and Jason Brennan, author of the book “Against democracy”<sup>49</sup> says that “when it comes to politics, some know a lot, most people know nothing and many people know less than nothing”.<sup>50</sup> In his book, Brennan divides the population into three categories: Hobbits, Hooligans and Vulcans.

- . Hobbits are mostly “apathetic and ignorant about politics. They lack strong and fixed opinions.”
- . Hooligans “have strong and largely fixed world views”, they consume information in a biased way and usually despise people with different political opinions. They can be compared with sport ultras.
- . Vulcans “think scientifically and rationally about politics”.<sup>51</sup> Their opinions are weighted and respect who dissent with them.

According to the author, most citizens are either hobbits or hooligans, or somewhere in between. Most citizens do not possess the basic political or institutional knowledge as highlighted by various surveys. For example, in the United States:

- . Half of Americans do not know that each State elects two senators.<sup>52</sup>
- . A third of citizens are unable to remember at least one of the three governmental branches.<sup>53</sup>
- . 73% cannot explain what the Cold War was.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Huddy, L; Sears, D; and Levy, J; (2013) “The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology (2 ed.). Oxford University Press

<sup>48</sup> Friedman, J. (2006) “Public Competence In Normative and Positive Theory: Neglected Implications of “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics.”

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 2

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 2

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 2

<sup>52</sup> Crain, C. (2016) “The Case against Democracy”. The New Yorker. Available Online at: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/11/07/the-case-against-democracy>

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 52

<sup>54</sup> PR Newswire (2011) “Newsweek Polls Americans on Their Knowledge of Being American; 38 Percent Failed”. Available Online at: <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/newsweek-polls-americans-on-their-knowledge-of-being-american-38-percent-failed-118366914.html>

. 53% believed the Constitution does not grant immigrants any right.<sup>55</sup>

. 43% do not know against whom the United States fought World War II.<sup>56</sup>

. 37% of people interviewed were not able to name at least one of the rights protected by the first amendment.<sup>57</sup>

These examples regard general institutional knowledge that do not need to be updated. Surveys on topics of actuality and policies, which may imply a greater effort, are even worse. For example:

. Most citizens are unable to identify any congressional candidates in their own district.<sup>58</sup>

. The majority of Americans do not know which party controls the Congress.<sup>59</sup>

. Before the 2004 Presidential elections, 70% of citizens were not aware that the government added a prescription drug benefit to Medicare which was the largest entitlement program since President Johnson began the War on Poverty.<sup>60</sup>

. During the 2000 US Presidential election, only little more than half of the population knew that Al Gore was more liberal than Bush. Significantly less than half knew that Al Gore was more supportive of welfare state programs and abortion rights.<sup>61</sup>

. In 2013, during the heated debate on Obamacare, 80% of voters were unaware of the controversial insurance exchanges at the core of the debate.<sup>62</sup>

We cited a few examples regarding the United States because surveys were easier to find but readers should not make the mistake of assuming political ignorance is exclusive to the United States. The actual situation is even worse than these findings may suggest because of three elements: the first one is that these are easy questions to be answered and would suffice just a few second research on the internet. Even more, the surveys are generally multiple answer questions and respondents can

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<sup>55</sup> Annenberg Public Policy Center (2017) “Americans Are Poorly Informed About Basic Constitutional Provisions”. University of Pennsylvania. Available Online at:

<https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/americans-are-poorly-informed-about-basic-constitutionalprovisions/>

<sup>56</sup> Newsweek staff (2011) “Take the quiz: what we don't know”. Newsweek. Available Online at:

<https://www.newsweek.com/take-quiz-what-we-dont-know-66047>

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 52

<sup>58</sup> Hardin, R. (2009) “How Do You Know? The Economics of Ordinary Knowledge”. Princeton University Press

<sup>59</sup> Somin I. (2013) “Democracy and Political Ignorance: Why Smaller Government Is Smarter”. Stanford University Press.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 2

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 2

<sup>62</sup> Kaiser Family Foundation (2013) “Health Tracking Poll: September 2013” Available Online at:

<https://www.kff.org/health-reform/poll-finding/kaiser-health-tracking-poll-september-2013/>

randomly choose and if lucky get the right answer. The second one is that knowing, for example that the immigration rate has decreased does not mean a lot per se. It does not say if people know how many immigrants are coming or understand the more complex international dynamics hidden behind such rates. People may attribute such results to the activities of politician who actually have few merits. Third, these surveys are generally conducted among the voting population and the Pew Research Center found that non-voters scored even lower: “On average, people who are not registered to vote answer 4.9 out of 12 questions correctly compared with 7.2% among voters”.<sup>63</sup> Therefore if one would add non-voters to surveys, the results would be even lower.

Indeed, ignorance is not uniformly spread across society and Converse (1964) says that “while the mean level of knowledge is low, variance is high. Most voters are ignorant, but some are highly informed and some are worse than ignorant”.<sup>64</sup> According to political scientist Scott Althaus (2003) “while people in the highest knowledge quartile averaged 15.6 correct answers out of 18 possible, people in the lowest average only 2.5 correct answers”.<sup>65</sup> As a matter of fact, results among people in the lowest knowledge quartile are impressively bad. In his publication, Althaus cited the results of a survey carried out in 1992 by The American Nation Election Studies who found that only 12% of people in the lowest quartile knew that the Republican Party was more conservative than the Democratic Party. Only 9.7% knew that Clinton was more in favour than Bush to expand government services or welfare state, and only 17.1% that Bush was more pro-life.<sup>66</sup> Over 90% of people in the highest quartile got these answers right. Literature on the topic of political and economic knowledge have found that knowledge is positively correlated to some factors while negatively to others. For example, Carpini & Keeter (1996) found that political knowledge is positively linked with having a college diploma, earning a high income, living in the western United States and being aged between 35 and 54; while negatively related with having only a high school diploma, earning a low income and living in the south of the United States.<sup>67</sup> We are therefore obviously not equal in knowledge, but people in the highest and lowest quartile possess the same voting weight.

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<sup>63</sup> Pew Research Center (2012) “What Voters Know about Campaign 2012. Available Online at: <https://www.people-press.org/2012/08/10/what-voters-know-about-campaign-2012/>

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 2

<sup>65</sup> Althaus, S. (2003) “Collective Preferences in Democratic Politics” Cambridge University Press

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 63

<sup>67</sup> Carpini, D. & Keeter S. (1996) “What Americans know about Politics and Why It Matters”, Yale University Press

## I.II Rational Ignorance

Democracy presupposes that citizens are well informed but according to the “Rational Ignorance theory” this is impossible. According to the theory, voters will never be well informed because it is rational to be political ignorant. If this theory were to be true, the strength of democracy and universal right to vote would be weakened.

The theory highlights a fundamental problem for Democracy because it suggests that the cost of voting is superior to its benefits. To better understand the theory, we will inquire on why people vote. The democratic system legitimacy derives from citizens participation but if it is rational for them not to vote, the foundations of Democracy may collapse. Downs (1957) proposes the following equation to explain political turnout:

$$R=(B)(P)-C+D$$

Where, R is the reward an individual gain from voting

B is the assumed benefit that would derive from the election of the preferred candidate

P is the perceived probability the preferred candidate will win

C is the cost the individual incurs in voting in terms of being politically informed

D is the psychological satisfaction of voting

The author claimed that if R is positive the individual will participate in the election because rewards outweighs the costs. If R is negative, the individual will not vote.

According to what is known as the “Paradox of voting”, the cost of voting will generally exceed the benefits. It would therefore be rational for citizens not to sustain those costs. The issue was noted long before the adoption of universal voting suffrage. French philosopher Nicolas de Condorcet already considered in 1793 that “In single-stage elections, where there are a great many voters, each voter's influence is very small. It is therefore possible that the citizens will not be sufficiently interested [to vote] and we know that this interest [which voters have in an election] must decrease with each individual's [i.e. voter's] influence on the election and as the number of voters increases”.<sup>68</sup>

Also German philosopher Hegel made similar observations in 1821 “As for popular suffrage, it may be further remarked that especially in large states it leads inevitably to electoral indifference, since the casting of a single vote is of no significance where there is a multitude of electors.”<sup>69</sup>

According to Brennan (2016), some economists estimate that an individual has more chances of winning the Powerball lottery a few times in a row than casting a tie-breaking vote. In other words, in the United States, there is approximately one in a million chance that your vote will break a tie in

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<sup>68</sup> Mclean, I. & Hewitt, F. (1994) “Condorcet”. Edward Elgar Publishing

<sup>69</sup> Hegel, W. F. (1820) “Elements of the Philosophy of Right”. Cambridge University Press

a Presidential election, but only if you vote for a major political party and live in a swing state.<sup>70</sup> Therefore the probability that an individual vote will have an effect on the election is close to zero which makes the “expected instrumental benefit of voting” close to zero.<sup>71</sup> Therefore, if we assume that voting implies the responsibility of being correctly informed and as we have shown, the cost of voting is superior to its benefits, we may then deduce that it is rational for people to be politically ignorant. This could explain why so many people lack political knowledge concluding that the democratic system incentivizes people to be ignorant.

To this point, we have seen that citizens are not always rational and fail to choose the alternative that would maximize their expected utility because they lack the necessary information. Citizens may also fail to choose the “best possible option” because they incorrectly process information. This is known as “cognitive biases” or “psychological biases”. This second section will talk about them, more precisely about the “Big Five personality traits”, Confirmation bias, Availability Bias, Peer pressure and Authority, Political Tribalism and other biases (bandwagon effect, Framing effect, Candidate’s name order and Candidate’s appearance).

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 2

<sup>71</sup> Blais, A. (2003) “The calculus of voting: An empirical test”. *European Journal of Political Research*

## II. Cognitive Biases

### II.I The Big Five Personality Traits

People gain knowledge primarily in two distinct ways:<sup>72</sup>

. The first one is through direct experience. For example, I know that touching a boiling object is not a good idea because I have been burned in the past.

. Second, by exposure to the information on the subject coming from a third party. For example, I know the earth is round because of scientific research and not because I have seen it with my own eyes. This is usually how people get informed on social and political issues.

Because of the indirect link, information can easily be distorted. We are constantly bombarded with news and stimulus and must selectively choose what deserves our attention and what to filter out.

The world around us is too complex for people to understand everything and people are obliged to take cognitive short cuts which may lead to fallacious reasoning.

The first bias that may affect people's behaviour regards their personality. Every citizen has different natural predispositions which affect how they process information and what they classify as important. Indeed, people who believe migration to be the most pressing issue will generally vote for conservative parties while their countrymen may vote for an ecologist party because more interested in the environment. Such behaviour is explained by the "Big Five personality traits" theory that believes people's choices to be determined by their personalities.<sup>73</sup> According to the model first developed by Tupes and Christal in 1961, the five personalities traits are:

- . Openness: regards ones tendency to enjoy learning and experiencing new things.
- . Conscientiousness: is associated with people who are reliable, organized and methodical.
- . Extroversion: extroverts are energetic and like interacting with others.
- . Agreeableness: individuals who are friendly, compassionate and cooperative.
- . Neuroticism: regards one's ability to control emotions and how they react to bad stimulus.<sup>74</sup>

In the past decade, the model has also been transported to political issues. Schoen & Schumann (2007)<sup>75</sup> applied the Big Five model to German voters and noted that "the evidence confirms that

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<sup>72</sup> Lindzey, G. (1954) "Handbook of social psychology". OUP USA

<sup>73</sup> Tupes, E.C., Christal, R.E. (1961) "Recurrent Personality Factors Based on Trait Ratings," Technical Report ASD-TR-61-97, Lackland Air Force Base, TX: Personnel Laboratory, Air Force Systems Command,

<sup>74</sup> Van Thiel, E. (2018) "Big Five personality test traits". Free psychological tests  
Available Online at: <https://www.123test.com/big-five-personality-theory/>

<sup>75</sup> Schoen, H. & Schumann, S. (2007) "Personality Traits, Partisan Attitudes, and Voting Behavior. Evidence from Germany". International Society of Political Psychology

personality traits indirectly affect partisan attitudes and voting behaviour''. More precisely they found that Openness makes voters incline to support leftist parties, low level of Conscientiousness and high levels of Agreeableness increase the likelihood of voting parties who advocate economic liberalism, and citizens with high levels of Neuroticism tend to promote parties that offer protection against cultural and material challenges. Gerber et al (2010)<sup>76</sup> replicated the study in the United States and found similar results. Citizens prefer right-wing parties when they exhibit traits of Conscientiousness and left-wing parties when demonstrating traits of Openness. According to the authors, Agreeableness people tend to favour parties collocated on the left on economic policies and parties on the right on social policies because they ''desire to maintain social harmony and traditional communal relationships. Neuroticists go right in economic policies and left in social issues. Both studies found that Extroversion does not play a role in ideology.

## II.II Confirmation Bias

Leonie Huddy, David Sears and Jack Levy write in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology* that ''Political decision making is often beset with biases that privilege habitual thoughts and consistency over careful consideration of new information''.<sup>77</sup> This is also known as Confirmation bias, which can be defined as the tendency to search for information that confirms one's beliefs.<sup>78</sup> Internet further increased this bias because information are automatically selected and provided to the customer based on his preferences derived from his previous researches, without inquiring which of them are correct and which incorrect. For example, on social media, republican supporters will mainly receive and view posts about other republican party members even though the posts sponsored may contain fake news and contribute to misinformation. In this section we will provide three studies that show that Confirmation bias affects how we search information, how we interpret it and how we remember it.

In 1960, psychologist Peter Cathcart Wason conducted a series of experiments known as ''Wason's rule discovery task''.<sup>79</sup> The aim of the research was to show that people do not optimally test their beliefs because they tend to adopt a one sided approach that may lead to false conclusions. People

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<sup>76</sup> Gerber, A. S.; Huber, G. A.; Doherty, D.; Dowling, C. M; Ha, S. E. ''Personality and Political Attitudes: Relationships across Issue Domains and Political Contexts''. *American Political Science Review*

<sup>77</sup> Huddy, L; Sears, D; and Levy, J; (2013) ''The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology (2 ed.). Oxford University Press

<sup>78</sup> Plous, S. (1993) ''The Psychology of Judgment and Decision Making''. McGraw-Hill Education

<sup>79</sup> Cherry, K. (2019) ''How Confirmation Bias Works''. Available Online at:  
<https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-a-confirmation-bias-2795024>

seem to be satisfied with evidence that confirm their initial hypothesis and to prove this, Wason proposed to the research subjects a series of three number: 2-4-8 and asked them to identify the series rule. To help them, Wason encouraged subjects to list a similar series of three numbers that may follow the same rule. Most participants typically identified a similar series such as 16-32-64 and would receive a positive feedback. Wason invited subjects to give other examples and to answer to the initial question only when they were sure. Subjects continued to indicate numbers in line with their initial assumption such as: 3-6-12 or 5-10-20 and of course continued to receive positive feedbacks. Almost all replied that the rule was: a sequence of numbers multiplied by two, which was wrong. The right answer was simply a series of increasing numbers. Most participants failed because they only tested hypothesis of series that confirmed their initial intuition and never adopted a different point of view questioning their initial belief. The same experiment was carried out by Youtube page Veritasium<sup>80</sup> in 2014, the only difference was that the researcher immediately asked after the first trial what the rule was. Participants gave the same answer: multiply by two, to which the researcher said that it was wrong. He then asked them to propose another series of number to identify the rule to which they continued to propose only series of number that would have satisfied their initial intuition even knowing that the rule was not a series of number multiplied by two. These two examples clearly show that we fall trap to the effects of confirmation bias. The right approach would rather be to try to prove the initial hypothesis wrong, as suggested by Karl Popper's (1959) "Falsifiability" strategy.<sup>81</sup> The principle states that a theory is correct if it cannot be disproved. For example, if our goal is to prove that all swans are white it is more advantageous to search for a black swan rather than continuing to look for white swans. Yale professor Dan Kahan carried out in 2013 a similar study, this time related to political beliefs and resulted in a shocking result.<sup>82</sup> Before submitted to the test, participants were asked about their political beliefs and then to solve a mathematical problem. The problem was exactly the same, but half the candidates were told the problem regarded the effectiveness of a new skin cream, the other half about gun control laws. The result found by professor Kahan is paradoxal: political beliefs did not affect the judgment about the skin cream but heavily influenced the one about gun control. Given that the mathematical problem was exactly the same one would have initially predicted that people with the same political beliefs would found the same result in both mathematical tests. Instead,

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<sup>80</sup> Veritasium (2014) "Can you Solve it". Youtube. Available Online at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vKA4w2O61Xo>

<sup>81</sup> Popper, K. (1959) "The Logic of Scientific Discovery" Routledge

<sup>82</sup> Kahan, D. M.; Peters, E.; Dawson, E.; Slovic, P. (2013) "Motivated Numeracy and Elinghtened Self-Government". Yale Law School



conservatives judged gun control law less effective than the new cream and liberals concluded that gun control laws were better than the one of the new cream.

Psychologist Jonathan Haidt explains why people often fall trap to confirmation bias by saying that “Reasoning was not designed to pursue the truth. Reasoning was designed by evolution to help us win arguments. [...] Reasoning can lead to poor outcomes, not because humans are bad at it, but because they systematically strive for arguments that justify their beliefs or their actions”.<sup>83</sup> Even more, according to the “Schema Theory”, knowledge is organized in units and within them information is stored. This influences the persons mental structure and how they see the world. According to the theory, information that matches the person’s mental structure will easily be remembered.<sup>84</sup> We therefore remember more easily information that confirms our prior thoughts about the world. These mental schemes are extremely hard to change even in the face of contradictories information. The Schema theory helps us understand why it is so difficult for people to change idea about certain topics even in the presence of compelling evidence. Another argument not directly related with Confirmation bias but that may also explains why new facts do not change the opinion of people, is that individuals normally do not base their judgments on quantitative elements but rather on qualitative. For example, people who favour strict immigration laws do not care about the precise number of immigrants arriving each year, they simply believe they are too many. Therefore, showing them evidence that the number of arrivals has decreased does not affect their attitude towards immigration laws because this new number may still be too high in their perception. Gaines et al. (2007)<sup>85</sup> carried out a panel study on the growing number of American casualties and the participants attitudes toward the Iraq War, in order to evidence this phenomenon. The research found that the attitude of those in favour of the Iraq war was not affected by data on the increase in the number of casualties.

Returning to the Confirmation Bias, people also tend to always read journals in line with their views. Based on what journal people buy one could estimate for what party he will vote. In Italy for example, left wing militants will certainly read “La Repubblica” or “Il Corriere della Sera” rather than “Il Messaggero” o “Il Giornale”. In the United States, President Donald Trump supporters will certainly favour seeing Fox News rather than CNN. Confirmation bias therefore affects the research, the interpretation and the storage of information, and may result in people making erroneous conclusions.

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<sup>83</sup> Haidt, J. (2010) “The New Science of Morality”. Edge

<sup>84</sup> Oswald, M. E.; Grosjean, S. (2004), “Cognitive Illusions: A Handbook on Fallacies and Biases in Thinking, Judgement and Memory,” Psychology Press

<sup>85</sup> Gaines, B. J., Kuklinski, J. H., Quirk, P. J., Peyton, B., & Verkuilen, J. (2007) “Same facts, different interpretations: Partisan motivation and opinion on Iraq.” Journal of Politics

## II.III Availability Bias

Availability bias is another cognitive distortion that may affect decision making. The research conducted by Tversky & Kahneman (1973)<sup>86</sup> found that people estimate the likelihood of an event occurring based on how easily they can remember examples of it happening in the past. Indeed, we often lack the time to investigate statistical probabilities and therefore assume that if we repeatedly hear an information it must be because it happens often. While this cognitive shortcut may be legitimate in some cases, in others it may lead to erroneous conclusions and affect governmental priorities.

Psychologists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, first studied the phenomenon in 1973 and published the following research paper “Availability: A heuristic for judging frequency and probability.”<sup>87</sup> In the study, subjects were asked whether they believed that most words in the English language start with the letter K (example: kitchen) or had the letter K as the third letter of the word (example: ask). The result showed that most participants believed the English language contained more words starting with K than had the letter in third position. These conclusions were incorrect because in English, there are three times more words with the letter K in third position than starting with it. Tversky & Kahneman (1973) explained the misleading results because it is easier to recall words starting with the letter K. The professors concluded that people tend to overestimate the probability of an event based on how many times they can recall the event occurring and not on actual statistical data. Research by Schwarz et al. (1991)<sup>88</sup> rather explain the bias by how easy it is to remember similar events and not by the number of examples remembered. Nonetheless, both researches agree that availability bias may lead to overestimation of the significance of a problem because we often hear about the subject.

The information we are exposed to is primarily provided by media coverage who therefore play a crucial role in affecting people’s perception of probability events. In the beginning of the 2000s for example, there was a sharp increase in the United States media coverage about child kidnapping. While children kidnapping rate decreased since 1960, most Americans influenced by the news misleadingly believed their kids were safer before. When asked, people also tend to overestimate the probability of death that are “newsworthy” events such as airplane accidents, terrorist or shark attacks with respect to events that receive less coverage but more common such as car accidents or

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<sup>86</sup> Tversky, A. & Kahneman, D. (1973) “Availability: A heuristic for judging frequency and probability”.

ScienceDirect

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 86

<sup>88</sup> Schwarz, N.; Bless, H.; Strack, F.; Klumpp, G.; Rittenauer-Schatka, H.; Simons, A. (1991). "Ease of retrieval as information: Another look at the availability heuristic". *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

death caused by diseases. To demonstrate this, Riddle (2010) carried out an experiment to understand how television affects social reality judgments and concluded that “People watching vivid violent media gave higher estimates of the prevalence of crime and police immorality in the real world”<sup>89</sup>. Media coverage therefore distorts our perception of reality.

This bias can have repercussion in political voting because it may shift citizens perception of certain social issues leading them to change their voting behaviour. For example, the continuous media coverage of terrorist threats may increase fear in the population who may overestimate the probability of these events happening and consequently affect their vote. Italian right-wing party “Lega Nord” sharply increased its consensus from the start of the Mediterranean migration crisis because the continuous coverage of the arrival of immigrants led many citizens to believe that an “invasion” was going on while the number of immigrants arriving each year never exceeded 0,5% of the total population.<sup>90</sup>

## **II.IV Peer Pressure and Authority**

Living in a society, we are often confronted with the opinions of others and care about what they think about us. For this reason, we may incur in what is commonly known as Peer pressure. Peer pressure can be defined as the conformity to certain behaviour because the majority of the group acts that way. Being confronted with other people’s view is theoretically a good thing, it can help widen knowledge possessed and adopt different points of view but sometimes this social pressure may lead people to change their behaviour or thoughts.

The most famous example is perhaps the “Asch conformity experiment” carried out by social psychology pioneer Solomon Asch in 1951.<sup>91</sup> The experiment consisted in identifying which of the three lines proposed (A, B, C) was similar to the target line. The answer was easy because two of the lines were clearly of different sizes and no subject in the control group, where there was no pressure to conform, submitted the wrong answer. To test people’s compliance with social pressures, the experiment subject was placed in a room with seven confederates who were all asked by the researcher to give the same wrong answer. Answers were submitted publicly and out loud so that

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<sup>89</sup> Riddle, K. (2010). "Always on My Mind: Exploring How Frequent, Recent, and Vivid Television Portrayals Are Used in the Formation of Social Reality Judgments". *Media Psychology*.

<sup>90</sup> Data Available Online at:

[http://www.libertacivilimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/cruscotto\\_statistico\\_giornaliero\\_31-12-2018\\_0.pdf](http://www.libertacivilimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/cruscotto_statistico_giornaliero_31-12-2018_0.pdf)

<sup>91</sup> McLeod, S. (2018) “Solomon Asch - Conformity Experiment” Simply Psychology. Available Online at: <https://www.simplypsychology.org/asch-conformity.html>

everyone in the room could hear them. The subject of the experiment was the last one to submit his answer. The experiment results were that out of 18 trials, 12 subjects conformed to the group pressure and gave the wrong answer. Comparing this result to the one of the control group, we can assert that 12 out of 18 participants changed their belief in order to conform with the group.

Just like Peer pressure, Authority bias can also influence behaviour. The difference between the two biases is that the subject rather than being influenced by a group is manipulated by a figure exercising authority. The most famous and shocking experiment is the “Milgram experiment”. The social psychology experiment was carried out by professor Stanley Milgram. The test started in 1961 with the ambitious aim to understand people’s behaviour during the Holocaust and whether it was possible that “Eichmann and his million accomplices in the Holocaust were just following orders?”.<sup>92</sup> The experiment was conducted in the following way: subjects were told they were participating in an experiment about the effects of physical punishment on memory. Three persons participated in the test: one was the “student” who would answer questions submitted by the subject under the control of the “researcher” who served as the authority figure. Every time the student would give a wrong answer, the subject would confer the student an electric shock. With every wrong answer given, the shock would increase by 15 volts until a maximum of 450 volts, enough to seriously hurt someone. The student and the researcher were part of the experiment and the volts were of course fake, but the subject did not know it. The student was also instructed to complain and in some versions of the experiment even plead for mercy screaming that he suffers from a heart condition. When high voltages were reached the “student” was instructed to fell completely silent. Every time the subject (the one submitting the shocks) hesitated, he was invited by the researcher to continue. The experiment would stop after the researcher had invited the subject to continue with the test four times in a row. The aim of the experiment was to see how far the subject was willing to go in following orders. Milgram’s results were shocking: out of the 40 subjects, 26 (65%) administered the final 450 volts shock and all of them gave shocks of at least 300 volts. All subjects experienced some form of stress and discontent with the experiment, but this did not stop them from continuing. Stanley Milgram wrote “I observed a mature and initially poised businessman enter the laboratory smiling and confident. Within 20 minutes he was reduced to a twitching, stuttering wreck, who was rapidly approaching a point of nervous collapse. He constantly pulled on his earlobe and twisted his hands. At one point he pushed his fist into his forehead and muttered: “Oh, God, let’s stop it.” And yet he continued to respond to every word of the experimenter and obeyed to the end.”<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Milgram, S. (1963) “Behavioral Study of obedience”. The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology.

<sup>93</sup> Coffeandjunk “Authority Bias: Too Much Obedience Makes You Do Stupid Things”.

Available Online at: <https://coffeandjunk.com/authority-bias/>

Robert Cialdini (1984) explains why people are subject to the authority bias in his book “Influence”. Cialdini writes: “Early on, these people (parents, teachers) knew more than we did, and we found that taking their advice proved beneficial- partly because of their greater wisdom and partly because they controlled our rewards and punishments. As adults, the same benefits persist for the same reasons, though the authority figures are now employers, judges, and government leaders. Because their positions speak of greater access to information and power, it makes sense to comply with the wishes of properly constituted authorities. It makes so much sense, in fact, that we often do so when it makes no sense at all.”<sup>94</sup>

Peer pressure studies and authority bias are well documented phenomenon’s and are frightening because people come to deny clear evidence and conform to behaviour they would normally judge as wrong.<sup>95</sup> These two principles explain why normal people may commit atrocious actions as in the case of the Holocaust. Indeed, many of history’s most cruel mass crimes were carried out because of Peer pressure or conformity to the will of an authoritarian figure. The principle can of course also be applied to political decision-making and alter one’s vote and beliefs, as showed by Kenny (1994),<sup>96</sup> Beck (2002)<sup>97</sup> and Sinclair (2009)<sup>98</sup>. These three studies show that Peer pressure affects political affiliation. However, an interesting research by Gerber, Green, and Larimer in 2008<sup>99</sup> found that Peer pressure can also have positive political effects and increase election turnout rates.

## **II.V Political Tribalism**

Political tribalism refers to a person’s strong attachment and loyalty towards a political party. We strongly identify with a group and our identity becomes linked to the one of the group. This may often result in intense and unconditional support for the groups actions without ever questioning them. This mental shortcut may lead citizens to support policies they would have otherwise rejected and

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<sup>94</sup> Cialdini, R. (1984) “Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion” Harperbusiness

<sup>95</sup> Campos, C. F. S.; Hargreaves Heap, S.; de Leon, F. (2016) “The political influence of peer groups: experimental evidence in the classroom”. Oxford Economic Papers

<sup>96</sup> Kenny C. B. (1994) “The microenvironment of attitude change” The Journal of Politics,

<sup>97</sup> Beck P. A. (2002) “Encouraging political defection: the role of personal discussion networks in partisan desertions to the opposition party and Perot votes in 1992” Political Behaviour

<sup>98</sup> Sinclair B. (2009) “The multi-valued treatment effects of political networks and context: when does a Democrat vote like a Republican?” University of Chicago

<sup>99</sup> Gerber, A. S.; Green, D. P.; Larimer, C. W (2008) “Social Pressure and Voter Turnout: Evidence from a Large-Scale Field Experiment”. American Political Science Review

that do not maximize their expected utility. The loyalty to a group may override the commitment to the truth.

Examples of tribalism are often found in sports where fans are passionate about supporting their favourite team. Their love is unconditional and not based on rational calculations of which team is objectively the strongest and we also tend to support the same team for the rest of our lives. While there is absolutely nothing wrong with being passionate about sports, politics should not be a matter of unconditional support but rather votes should be pondered rationally. As already seen in the section I.I Lack of Political Knowledge, according to Jason Brennan also in politics most people are “hooligans”.<sup>100</sup> The internet is full of entertaining videos where the interviewer asks a party activist if he would agree with policies proposed by his party. Blinded by unquestioned loyalty he agrees only to be subsequently told that these were policies suggested by the opposing party.

Professor Drew Westen conducted with other colleagues a study showing the effects of political tribalism.<sup>101</sup> The research was carried out during the 2004 United States presidential election and involved supporters of John Kerry and those of George W. Bush. Subjects were shown contradictory quotes from their leader followed by an “exculpatory statement”. The study found a clear political bias: where Bush supporters agreed that Kerry contradicted himself, they tended to only partially agree that also Bush did. Kerry partisans also accepted with much more ease Kerry’s exculpatory statement rather than the one of Bush. Clearly an unfair sentence for the same crime. A study carried out by Tajfel (1978)<sup>102</sup> also clearly shows “categorizing individuals into two arbitrary, but distinct, social groupings is sufficient to elicit discriminatory evaluations and behaviour (ingroup bias). The tendency to favour members of one’s ingroup over outgroup members has been demonstrated in many different forms, including evaluative biases (attributing more positive characteristics to ingroup members than outgroup members), attributional biases (holding outgroup members more responsible for negative outcomes and giving ingroup members more credit for positive outcomes), allocation biases (distributing more positive rewards and credits to ingroup members than to outgroup individuals), and interaction biases (greater cooperation toward ingroup members and competition toward outgroup members)” as written by Susan Fiske and Michael North (2015).<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Brennan, J. (2016) “Against Democracy” Princeton University Press

<sup>101</sup> Westen, D.; Blagov, P. S.; Harenski, K.; Klits, C.; Hermann, S. (2006) “Neural Bases of Motivated Reasoning: An fMRI Study of Emotional Constraints on Partisan Political Judgment in the 2004 U.S. Presidential Election”. *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*

<sup>102</sup> Tajfel, H. (Ed.). (1978) “Differentiation between social groups: Studies in the social psychology of intergroup relations”. Academic Press.

<sup>103</sup> Fiske, S. T. & North, M. S. (2015) “Measures of Personality and Social Psychological Constructs”

Other than leading to unfair treatment and bias judgments, political tribalism can also increase social tensions. Political affiliation may sometimes become intense political rivalry and escalate in hate and violence. We are indeed witnessing political debates that are always more violent and disrespectful.

## **II.VI Other Cognitive Biases**

### **. Bandwagon Effect**

The bandwagon effect is a psychological effect that induce people to do something because influenced by other's similar actions, regardless of their beliefs. This conformity is extremely popular in fashion where people buy clothes because they see famous people wearing them. We have already seen an example of bandwagon effect in section II.IV about Peer pressure and the Asch conformity experiment. While Peer pressure and bandwagon effect are both pressures to conform and may lead to cognitive biases, the two phenomena are distinct. Bandwagon can simply be explained by the popular phrase "jump on the bandwagon", that is for example supporting a candidate just because he is likely to win.

Indeed, as shown by Nadeau et al (1993), the bandwagon effect often occurs in voting and people tend to change their opinion and vote for the party ahead in the polls in order to be in the "winner's side".<sup>104</sup> Vicki G. Morwitz and Carol Pluzinski (1996) tested the bandwagon effect during the 1992 Presidential election.<sup>105</sup> During the experiment, some participants were shown polls indicating that Bill Clinton was ahead while other participants weren't. Morwitz and Pluzinski arrived at the conclusion that "political polls do alter voting behaviour" and that on some circumstances polls "can lead voters to actually change their preferences and their voting behaviour". Indeed, during the experiment some participants who intended to vote for Bush, after seeing the polls, decided to vote for Clinton. Polls are especially effective in influencing "independent voters" as shown by a 1994 study carried out by Robert K. Goidel and Todd G. Shields.<sup>106</sup>

For example, the bandwagon effect may occur in the United States during political election. Because of the time zones the eastern results of elections are diffused while polls are still open in the west which may therefore alter the result in the west. Plus, each State votes for the party's primaries at

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<sup>104</sup> Nadeau, R.; Cloutier, E.; Guay, J. H (1993) "New Evidence about the Existence of a Bandwagon Effect in the Opinion Formation Process". Sage Publications, Ltd.

<sup>105</sup> Morwitz, V. G. & Pluzinski, C. (1996). "Do Polls Reflect Opinions or Do Opinions Reflect Polls?". Journal of Consumer Research.

<sup>106</sup> Goidel, R. K. & Shields, T. G. (1994) "The Vanishing Marginals, the Bandwagon, and the Mass Media". The Journal of Politics

different time interval which may influence other States. This is why candidates strive to take the lead early on in the election race.

In Italy for example, in order to avoid the bandwagon effect, political polls cannot be diffused in the 15 days prior to the election.

### **. Framing Effect**

People's decisions are influenced by how the options are presented and indeed there is a famous saying that goes "It's not what you say, it's how you say it". Psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky conducted the following experiment in order to test the framing effect. Insurance professionals were asked to minimize the loss incurred by the sinking of three insured boats. Each boat carried a cargo which will be lost. Kahneman and Tversky presented the team of insurance professionals two possible scenarios. In the first one, participants had to choose between: option 1 which implied to save the cargo of just one of the boats and option 2 that consisted in 1/3 probability of saving all three cargos but at the same time 2/3 probability of saving none. The test result showed that 71% of participants went with option 1. In the second scenario, insurance professionals were given the following options: plan A would result in the loss of 2/3 of the cargos and plan B had 2/3 probability of losing all three cargos but 1/3 of saving all. This time, 80% of participants choose plan B. Careful readers would have noted that option 2 and plan B have the same outcome but are framed differently and because of this, have different rates of approval.<sup>107</sup>

A paper published in 2007 by Bütler and Maréchal entitled "Framing effects in political decision making: evidence from a natural voting experiment" shows how framing effect influence the outcome of political referendums. The study examines the results of two virtually identical Swiss referendums where both ballots advocated a decrease in the retirement legal age but resulted in a "differences in approval rates of nearly seven percentage points."<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Mohammed, S. () "Framing Bias, Examples and Decision-Making in Business". Medium. Available Online at: <https://medium.com/@shahmm/framing-bias-examples-and-decision-making-in-business-92a10669db71>

<sup>108</sup> Bütler, M. & Maréchal, M. A. (2007) "Framing effects in political decision making: evidence from a natural voting experiment". CESifo working paper. Available Online at: [https://www.ifo.de/DocDL/cesifo1\\_wp1940.pdf](https://www.ifo.de/DocDL/cesifo1_wp1940.pdf)



### **. Candidates Name Order**

Harris (1934)<sup>109</sup> and Wilson (1910)<sup>110</sup> believe the arrangement of candidate's names on the voting ballots has influence on the election's outcome. According to their researches, being the front runner helps the candidate win the election because not well-informed citizens are satisfied with choosing the first option without deepening the research. Indeed, for example when we search for information on the internet, we will likely first click on the first link and only select others link if not satisfying with the initial choice.

### **. Candidate's Appearance**

Impressions are very important in life as in politics and physical appearance play a great role in shaping people's perceptions. Political candidates are well aware of the importance of curing their image.

According to psychology professor Alexander Todorov, appearing competent is the most important characteristic a politician must possess, and “we discern it from the candidate's face.”<sup>111</sup> The effect is so powerful that Charles C. Ballew and Alexander Todorov (2007) were able to predict “68.6% of the gubernatorial races and 72.4% of the Senate races” collecting “competence based solely on the facial appearance of candidates”.<sup>112</sup> Although the most famous example of candidate's appearance is perhaps the first televised Presidential debate between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon in 1960. Most Americans viewed the debate on the television and believed Kennedy has won, while those who listened to it on the radio thought Nixon had won. The debate launched Kennedy towards the Presidency of the United States showcasing the importance of appearance in politics.

In this first chapter, we have seen that in democracy, citizens are required to make several political decisions but that they are not always well prepared for the task. Democracy grants rights but also responsibilities which ignorant citizens neglect. Because of political ignorance and cognitive

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<sup>109</sup> Harris, J. P. (1934) “Election administration in the United States”. Brooklings Institute Press

<sup>110</sup> Wilson, W. (1910) “Hide-and-seek politics”. North American Review

<sup>111</sup> Gorvett, Z. (2017) “A candidate's appearance can influence votes more than you think – so what exactly is a good look for a politician?”. BBC. Available Online at: <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20171018-the-hidden-ways-that-faces-shape-politics>

<sup>112</sup> Ballew, C. C. & Todorov, A. (2007) “Predicting political elections from rapid and unreflective face judgments”. US National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health

biases citizens may end up choosing outcomes that may go against their own interests. Electoral results are extremely important because they influence governmental policies and bad votes will lead to bad policies, affecting society as a whole.

We have also analysed why people's choices are often not rational and may fail in maximizing expected utility. In the first section, called Political Ignorance, we have seen that average citizens often lack the basic political knowledge in order to evaluate which may be the best political candidate. In the second section of the first part, called Rational Ignorance, we have seen that the democratic system incentive people to be ignorant because the costs of voting outweighs the benefits. Indeed, the chances of casting a tie breaking vote are minor while the cost of consistently being politically updated are high in times of time and fatigue. The expected instrumental benefit of voting being close to zero may explain the "Paradox of voting" and why citizens seem to be so uninterested in the political process.

The second section, called cognitive biases, illustrated that when making decisions people are often not rational not only because they lack necessary knowledge but also because they incorrectly process information. In details, the section presented the following cognitive biases and explained how they affect political decision making:

- . "Big Five personality traits" demonstrate how our personalities affect our decisions.
- . "Confirmation bias" shows that we privilege habitual thoughts, favouring information that confirm our beliefs and adopting a one-sided approach.
- . "Availability Bias" demonstrates that people are unable to correctly estimate the likelihood that an event will occur, shifting people's perception of reality.
- . "Peer pressure and Authority" reveals that people may modify their behaviour in order to conform to a group or according to the influence of an authoritarian figure.
- . "Political Tribalism" refers to the strong attachment an individual may have towards a political party which may impede him to objectively view political reality.
- . Other biases regarded the "Bandwagon effect": tendency to vote for the candidate most favoured to win.
- "Framing effect": how we frame the question has consequences on the result.
- "Candidate's name order": arrangement of candidate's names has influence on the election's outcome
- "Candidate's appearance": Physical appearance may influence voting results.

Therefore because of political ignorance or cognitive biases, citizens may end up choosing in the election inadequate candidates or outcomes that do not maximize their expected utility and bad votes

may lead to bad policies. Fortunately, we have seen that not all citizens are ignorant. While some are, others think rationally and scientifically about politics.

If citizens do not take seriously their political responsibility to be well informed, they damage their own self-interest and societal expected utility. This is precisely why, as shown in the introduction, so many prominent philosophers opposed to the idea of universal suffrage. Ignorant citizens may therefore be considered as a threat to democracy and greatly undermine the concept of universal suffrage.

Giving this wide spread ignorance, some might view universal suffrage to be overrated and favour a “rule of the knowers”. The next chapter will introduce the system of “Epistocracy” as proposed by Jason Brennan in his book “Epistocracy”.

## Chapter II: Epistocracy

In the previous chapter we have highlighted some of democracies flaws and found that people are often not rational and fail to maximize their expected utility in decision making. They neglect their duties to be informed. Average citizens are politically ignorant and fall trap to cognitive biases which may lead them to make political decisions that go against their own interests. We have also seen that citizens differ in the level of political knowledge possessed.

In this chapter we will introduce the concept of epistocracy which can be defined as the “rule of the knowers”. According to the theory, voting rights should be granted only to those who possess enough knowledge to make thoughtful decisions. Presumably, this form of government would maximize societal expected utility.

While most citizens are politically ignorant, others think rationally and scientifically about politics. Epistocracy suggests that democratic outcomes would be improved if competent and knowledgeable citizens were given greater chances to influence political outcomes. This could be achieved either by prohibiting ignorant citizens from voting or by granting multiple voting rights to those who possess more knowledge. Epistocracy therefore suggests a link between decision-making powers and knowledge. According to this theory, the system does not discriminate but rather allocates power purely on meritocratic basis. David Estlund (2003) acknowledges that it may be possible to know what is best and yet purposely decide not to choose it. However, for the sake of this chapter we will assume for now that the “knowers” act in good faith.

In democracy, all citizens are equally allowed to participate in the decision-making system by electing their parliamentary representatives, but the cost of bad decisions is evenly shared across society. The act of voting presumes the imposition of one’s will on others, and epistocracy believe that such right should not be granted without requirements. If our main concern is the quality of political decision, and if we believe that we have a right to a competent government -as the chapter will later advocates- isn’t it likely that an epistocracy would outperform democracy?

Epistocracy advocates a selection of voters based on their competence and knowledge. They campaign, that politics would not be the only field where equality does not exist and that in some fields Egalitarianism may even be counterproductive. For example, equality does not exist in medicine and everybody agrees that this is for the best. Imagine undergoing surgery and your fate depends on an untrained surgeon. At the same time, imagine the fate of society being decided by incompetent and ignorant citizens.

In the first section of the chapter called: The philosophical Routes of epistocracy, we will retrace the ideological routes of epistocracy.

In the second: Why isn't everyone ignorant and why people vote even if unlikely to influence electoral results? We will analyse why some people possess political knowledge and others do not.

The third section: Right to a Competent Government, argues that we have a right to a competent government and a moral obligation to adopt the form of government that produces the best outcomes.

In the fourth section: Democratic voting age restriction, we will point out that voting is not a natural right and therefore, according to epistocracy, must be acquired. The section will also respond to common critics about epistocracy, primarily that the system is discriminatory.

The fifth and last section: what epistocracy may look like, will describe how epistocratic systems may be structured.

# I. The Philosophical Routes of Epistocracy

Epistocracy can be defined as the rule of the knowers and asserts that political decision-making powers should be in the hands of those who possess enough knowledge to make the best decisions. This form of government differs from that of democracy because power is not equally shared in society. According to epistocracy equal voting weight does not produce the best results because those with more knowledge are in a better position to make decisions and therefore their votes should count more.

As already seen in the introduction of the thesis, some of the most gifted minds in the history of mankind opposed democracy and were sceptical about granting the average citizen the right and responsibility to vote. The debate on the rule of the knowers dates back to Plato's philosopher-kings and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) system of plural voting.

The idea that only the wise should rule was first formulated by ancient Greek philosopher Plato in "The Republic" written approximately in the 375 BC.<sup>113</sup> Plato envisaged a system where only the best -the philosophers- would rule. According to the Greek philosopher the average citizen did not have the capacity to distinguish between knowledge (episteme) and opinions (doxa) and that only the philosophers were capable of distinguishing the "truth".<sup>114</sup> Plato therefore believed that a "conjunction of political power and philosophic intelligence" was necessary to rule.<sup>115</sup>

Socrates, as depicted in Plato's "republic", also opposed democracy and eventually personally experienced the disastrous effects democracy may have, being sentenced to death by a popular jury. Socrates believed that voting is a skill that most citizens do not possess and compared the art of governing to the of the art of sailing. In Plato's "Republic", while talking to a character named Adeimantus, Socrates asks: "who would you rather want as a captain of your ship, any man or a trained sailor?" and concluded that letting anyone vote would be irresponsible and have catastrophic results, just like it would be to let anyone pilot a ship.<sup>116</sup> Socrates, as Plato, favoured a totalitarian regime government by philosopher kings.

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<sup>113</sup> Plato (2007) "The Republic". Penguin Classics

<sup>114</sup> Hill, L. (2017) "Against Epistocracy: For True Democracy". The Critique Available Online at: <http://www.thecritique.com/articles/against-epistocracy/>

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 114

<sup>116</sup> The Book of Life (2016) "Why Socrates Hated Democracy". The School of Life. Available Online at: <https://www.theschooloflife.com/thebookoflife/why-socrates-hated-democracy/>

19<sup>th</sup> century British philosopher and economist John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) was sympathetic with Plato's ideas of allocating power to those most capable of exercising it justly and wisely.<sup>117</sup> In his work "Considerations on Representative Government" first published in 1861, Mill argues that institutions must recognize that some citizens' opinions are worth more and advocates for a plural voting system because universal suffrage could not be abolished. Indeed, Mill feared that Plato's despotic society would negatively transform the excluded citizens into unthinking drones interested only in satisfying their daily routines. His proposal of weighting votes rests on two fundamental reasons: the first one, plural voting respects universal suffrage and prevents that a class of people may independently and authoritatively rule; the second, it allocates powers on the basis of merits. In contrast to Plato's government of the wise, Mill's system is the government of the educated because he believed this characteristic was easier to test.

Epistocracy also draws on political instrumentalism which believes that power should be distributed in order to produce the best possible outcome. The view is inspired by the writings of Italian political theorist Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) which famously wrote in "The Prince" that the "end justifies the means".<sup>118</sup> For political instrumentalists as for epistocrats, politics is therefore a means to an end.

According to John Dewey, Walter Lippmann's 1922 "Public Opinion" is "the most effective indictment of democracy as currently conceived".<sup>119</sup> According to Lippmann, citizens are unable to achieve basic knowledge of public affairs and consequently make reasonable choices. The increase in information available in the 20<sup>th</sup> century did not result in enlightened civic participation but rather in more noise and ignorance. Lippmann agrees with Plato's distinction between knowledge (episteme) and opinions (doxa), between as he terms it "the world outside and the picture in our heads".<sup>120</sup> The media blurred distinction between news and propaganda making it even harder to distinguish between facts and opinions, resulting in the distortion of the average citizen's perception of knowledge and society. Lippmann concluded that it was impossible to intelligently guide public opinion and the best possible solution was a "bureau of experts". The role of such experts was first of all to "prepare the facts for the men of action".<sup>121</sup> Experts did not directly have a role in the administration because this would have compromised their disinterestedness. Their main aim was to

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<sup>117</sup> Estlund, D. (2003) "Why Not Epistocracy?" in *Desire, Identity and Existence*. Academic Printing and Publishing

<sup>118</sup> Machiavelli, N. (2011) "The Prince". Penguin Classics

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 33

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 33

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 33

make “the unseen facts intelligible”.<sup>122</sup> Lippman does not entirely eliminate the average citizen from his democratic theory but severely limits his functions. He for example believe that they should not be included in the framing and administering of policies and legislation which should be left to the elite enlightened by the experts.

Evolutionary biologist and author Richard Dawkins opposed the 2016 United Kingdom European Union membership referendum on the basis that most people are not wit to decide on such delicate matter saying and wrote “Under-age people can’t vote. Whatever our criterion for thinking them unqualified (eg insufficiently developed reasoning powers or knowledge) there must be some adults less qualified than some under-age people. Is age the only practical threshold or could others be devised?”.<sup>123</sup>

The debate about epistocracy has also been reinvigorated by Jason Brennan famous book “Against Democracy” which advocates the adoption of an epistocratic system of government that could be achieved in two ways: either be excluding the uneducated citizens from the voting process and therefore extinguishing universal suffrage; or by implementing a system of weighted votes, recognizing that some opinions are worth more than others.

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 33

<sup>123</sup> Dawkins, R. (2019) Twitter. Available Online at:

[https://twitter.com/RichardDawkins/status/1137246160937033729?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etwteembed%7Ctwterm%5E1137246160937033729&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.telegraph.co.uk%2Fpolitics%2F2019%2F06%2F10%2Frichard-dawkinss-anti-democratic-prejudice-should-warn-us-dangers%2F](https://twitter.com/RichardDawkins/status/1137246160937033729?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etwteembed%7Ctwterm%5E1137246160937033729&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.telegraph.co.uk%2Fpolitics%2F2019%2F06%2F10%2Frichard-dawkinss-anti-democratic-prejudice-should-warn-us-dangers%2F)



## II. Why Isn't Everyone Ignorant and Why People Vote Even If Unlikely To Influence Electoral Results?

Although we have seen in the previous chapter that most people lack basic political knowledge, in order for the government of the wise to work, there must be in society some citizens who possess knowledge. While people on the lowest quartile of knowledge are politically ignorant, people in the highest are what Brennan calls “Vulcans”. These citizens “think scientifically and rationally about politics”,<sup>124</sup> and their opinions are weighted. In the first part of this section we will try to understand why some people are informed and others aren't. In the second part, we will explore what an attentive reader could have objected to the “Paradox of voting” explained in the first chapter, section I.II Rational Ignorance, that is: if it is rational for people not to vote because unlikely to have an effect on the result, how come that so many citizens actually vote?

Rational ignorance theory states that people are ignorant because the expected benefits of acquiring information are lower than the expected costs. We have indeed previously seen that the expected benefits, that is the probability of influencing an election is extremely low. Seeing that some citizens, fortunately, are very well informed may suggest to some readers that Rational ignorance theory fails but this conclusion is erroneous. The theory does not imply that people will not acquire political information, instead it suggests that they will not do so in order to vote. Whether someone acquires political knowledge depends on the incentives he may perceive which are not necessarily correlated with the act of voting. According to Jason Brennan (2016) some people possess knowledge because of the following reasons<sup>125</sup>:

- . “Hearing more and forgetting less”: education is associated with knowledge, and therefore the more someone is educated the more he will know. If let's say, someone remembers only half of what he has learned, someone with a college degree will know more than someone with a high school diploma.
- . “A belief in a moral duty to be informed”: Mackie (2009) found that some people believe they have a moral duty to vote and that this vote should be informed.<sup>126</sup>
- . “Belonging and social class”: this may be the result of peer pressure. People want to belong to a group and some of them expect its members to have some basic cultural knowledge. The more educated the group, the higher the cultural requirements necessary to be a member.

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 2

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 2

<sup>126</sup> Mackie, G. (2009) “Why It's Rational to Vote”. University of California at San Diego

. “Political geeks”: some people actually enjoy having knowledge and strive to acquire more for personal entertainment. For example, I personally find politics fascinating and enjoy reading about it.

Unfortunately, these reasons may explain why some citizens acquire political information but not necessarily that they possess correct political information. For example, the knowledge acquired in order to fit in with a group may often be influenced by peer pressure and result in conformity, and not independent rational thinking. People may also be attracted by an incorrect political theory, for example I might find an ideology fascinating even if wrong.

Let us now consider the second question of the section: why people vote even if unlikely to influence electoral results? Fortunately for democracy many citizens decide to vote even though their single voice will likely not have an influence in the election. Krosnick, Visser and Harder (2010) provided in Chapter 34 of the “Handbook of Social Psychology called “The Psychological Underpinnings of Political Behaviour” an extensive list of reasons why people vote. According to the scholars, the most important factor is education. The more the citizen is educated the more likely he will vote. Education is also likely to help people understand the political situation and decrease the cost of information. Other demographic factors such as Income, Occupation, Age, Gender, and Race are also likely to influence turnout. Krosnick, Visser and Harder believe that social and psychological factors may also have an effect on voter’s turnout. They identify the most important of these characteristics to be: neighbourhood characteristics (living in a neighbourhood with higher socioeconomic status encourages people to vote), group solidarity, trust, strength of party identification, knowledge, personal importance of policy issues, civic duty, habit, patience, altruism and personality (extroverts and people with high emotional stability are more likely to vote). Or that simply voting has become a ritual and people are now accustomed to the idea that they have a moral obligation to vote. These demographic, social and psychological factors may influence election turnouts. Voting is an essential procedure for the survival of democracy, and fortunately when deciding whether to vote not all citizens think in terms of personal costs and benefits. To some people, the moral duty to participate in the political decision-making process outweighs the cost benefits calculus.

### III. Right to a Competent Government

This section will defend the idea that for epistocrats, the outcome is more important than the process and because we have a right to a competent government, we should therefore adopt the system that guarantees the best outcome regardless of the fairness of the process.

Living in a society, under the rule of a government is a form of social contract. We agree to limit our freedom of action obeying laws and leave the “state of nature” because living under the rule of a government produces better results than living in pure anarchy. We may argue that the signing of the social contract entitled us to a competent government. The right can also be found in law, where numerous Constitutions and Declarations protect the right to be judged or heard by a competent jury. Imagine the following scenarios:

- . The jury is ignorant: when asked to deliberate he refuses to read the transcript and ignores information.
- . The jury is irrational: he examines evidence influenced by cognitive biases.
- . The jury is biased: the jury clearly favours one of the parties to the dispute and ignores all evidences against him.
- . The jury is racist: he condemns an innocent because he is black.

Given these circumstances, is the process legitimate and should the defendant submit to the jury’s authority? If it can be proven that the jury displaces such characteristics, the defendant has no moral obligation to recognize the authority of the judge and it would be unfair for a government to enforce the decisions. The competence principle can also be applied to the electorate. In the previous chapter we have seen that some citizens are ignorant, irrational, biased or even racists. The vote of these people influences the outcome of elections. A defendant has a right not to be exposed to a bad jury and therefore we could maintain that also a citizen has a right not to be exposed to the risk of a bad ruler because of the vote of ignorant, irrational, biased or racial citizens. We should indeed not underestimate the effects that a bad vote may have on society and policies enacted by a bad government affect all citizens, even those who rationally understood that the candidate was bad and did not vote for him.

The fairness of a process cannot be excluded from the outcome, and just like people have a right to a competent jury, they also enjoy such a right in terms of a competent government. The right to a competent jury may be violated if the jury is ignorant, irrational, biased or racist and the right to a competent government may also be breached if citizens participating in the decision-making process display such characteristics.

According to epistocrats there is a clear distinction between the fairness of the procedure and the effectiveness of the outcome and giving that politics is a means to an end, we should focus more on

the outcome than on the process. Consider the following example: the pilot of a plane has a heart attack and the plane is crashing but among the passenger there is a pilot. What should be done? The fairest procedure would be to ask all passengers what they believe should be done and since they are all equal, all passengers have a right to try and fly the plane. Although this may be the fairest process, we all agree that it would certainly result in a catastrophic disaster. The procedure that would guarantee the best possible outcome would rather be to let the second pilot try to fly the plane to the nearest airport. This example shows that the fairest procedure does not necessarily result in the best possible outcome. The fact that most of us would undoubtedly prefer option two (letting only the second pilot intervene) also shows that we believe the outcome to be more important than the procedure. Epistocracy believes that this principle should be valid for the plane crash as for the art of government. Democracy emphasises the fairness of the process and gives all citizens an equal decision-making power resulting in Egalitarianism. Going back to the plane crash example, Egalitarianism would therefore probably suggest option one. Epistocracy on the other hand, believes the outcome to be more important than the process and therefore would suggest option two. It would be irrational to prefer option two in the plane crash scenario and option one in the form of government. Some readers may agree that the outcome is more important than the process, but still be sceptical about epistocracy faith in experts. Indeed, critics may reply that experts may be wrong just like everyone else and cite a long list of famous examples: in 1932 Albert Einstein stated that it would be impossible to produce nuclear energy, in 1943 IBM president Thomas Watson predicted that few people will ever be interested in acquiring computers or in 2007 ex CEO of Microsoft Steven Ballmer believe the iPhone would be a failure. There are also situations where there is no clear solution that can be deduced rationally in order to solve a complex problem.

Epistocrats may reply that such remarks miss the point because the theory does not hold that epistocratic regimes will have an answer to all problems, but that more informed people have higher chances of choosing options that will maximize expected utility or at least less likely to choose options that will do more harm than good. It is therefore not a question of always choosing the best option, which is realistically impossible, but rather to increase its probability.

Berkeley professor Philip Tetlock on the other hand would not agree even with this claim. Tetlock published in 2005 a book called “Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It?” where he advocates that experts are not better at making predictions than the average citizen and writes that “people who make prediction their business—people who appear as experts on television, get quoted in newspaper articles, advise governments and businesses, and participate in punditry roundtables—are no better

than the rest of us.”<sup>127</sup> Tetlock conclusions are based on a twenty year study where he asked 284 political and economic commentators their predictions on future events. Therefore, the debate about the efficiency and reliability of experts opinions is still open.

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<sup>127</sup> Tetlock, P. E. (2005) “Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know? Princeton Univ Pr

## IV. Democratic Voting Age Restriction

Epistocrats believe that since voting presumes the imposition of one's will on others, such right should not be granted without requirements.

In modern democracy, the only voting requirement is related to age. Indeed, children are not permitted to vote. The democratic argument behind this restriction is that children are unable to understand the complexity of political issues and may easily be influenced. Epistocracy agrees that people possessing such characteristics should be excluded from the voting process but disagrees that they are peculiar to children.

Consider therefore the following statements:

. Most kids aged from 14 to 16 are ignorant even though some are very well informed. All kids under the age of 18 should be forbidden from voting.

. Most adults who do not finish high school are ignorant although some are very well informed. All adults who do not possess a high school diploma should be forbidden from voting.

Although the premise of the statements is the same, most people would agree with the first one but not with the second. Democratic regimes therefore tolerate discrimination on the basis of age but not on other parameters. Epistocracy holds that if discrimination should be made, at least it must be on competence.

Some may still object that discrimination on the basis of age is different and acceptable because temporary. Underaged children are not allowed to vote because they are not yet full members of society but one day will be. To this argument epistocracy replies that it also does not discriminate a priori and forever. Epistocracy does not forbid people from voting because of immutable characteristics such as height or skin colour -which would be racism and unacceptable-, it does on the basis of knowledge which can be learned.

One could also argue that democracy restricts voting to children precisely because it recognizes the necessity to have educated voters. Although some kids may be prodigies, most of them are traditionally less knowledgeable than adults. In most countries, the legal voting age (18) coincides with graduating from high school because democracies recognize that children should be educated before becoming full members of society. The problem might be that, even though school is compulsory, the institutional level of education, the student natural capabilities and his dedication may diverse, resulting in different levels of knowledge that society must recognize.

We might object that precisely because of the underlying difference in the education system, restricted voting may lead to an underrepresentation of minorities in the voting pools. Indeed, the system might favour the existing elite, maintain the status quo and block the social elevators. Rich families might facilitate the education of their children by sending them to private schools or by

paying tutors while children coming from modest backgrounds may not have the money to pay for college or be forced to find a job after high school in order to earn their living. Indeed, especially in the United States attending college is often a matter of possessing enough money to pay tuition.

Epistocracy recognizes that a selective vote may lead to the underrepresentation of minorities in the voting pools but respond with the following line of argument. They hold that unfortunately, minorities are underrepresented in various fields and politics should not be the only domain there Egalitarianism does not exist. Indeed, in 2016, “just 6 percent practicing doctors are underrepresented minorities (African Americans, Hispanics and Native Americans), while they make up 31.5 percent of the U.S. population.”<sup>128</sup> For epistocrats, the answer to this medical problem -as for the problem of voting underrepresentation- is not to give out free medical licenses, which may have disastrous consequences, but rather to tackle the injustices that impede minorities from enrolling in medical schools.

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<sup>128</sup> Robins, A. (2016) “Doctor’s Take: Being a Minority in Medicine”. AbcNews Available Online at: <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/doctors-minority-medicine/story?id=41419014>

## **V. What Epistocratic Regimes May Look Like**

A political system is epistocratic if it distributes power in proportion to competence or knowledge. The system may take various forms as will be described in the section. Epistocracy systems may retain various democratic institutions such as parliament, elections, free speech and so on. What differs is how political power is distributed.

### **V.I Weighted Voting**

As previously said, the idea dates back to 19<sup>th</sup> century British philosopher and economist John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) who proposed to grant multiple voting rights to well-educated and intelligent people. Although this system allows every citizen to vote, not all voters have the same amount of influence on the electoral result. Mill's proposal of weighting votes rests on two fundamental assumptions: the first one, plural voting respects universal suffrage and prevents that a class of people may independently and authoritatively rule; the second, it allocates powers on the basis of merits.

History already experienced some forms of weighted voting. In the Ancient Roman Assembly for example, votes were weighted in accordance to wealth and social status. The system is commonly used in multinational enterprises where each shareholder, depending on the number of shares he possesses, has a different number of votes. The difference is that epistocrats suggest that votes should not be based on wealth or social status but on knowledge. The underlined idea is that institutions must recognize that people's opinions should not count the same because people's have different levels of knowledge and expertise. The economic opinion of an economic Nobel Prize winner should not have the same value as the opinion of an illiterate.

Additional votes could be assigned to citizens who perform certain actions which may be related to knowledge or deemed of social value. The system functions just like university credits, the more classes a student passes, the more credits he receives. For example, if a person graduates from high-school he will gain an additional vote. If he then graduates from college, he receives one more extra vote and so on. This system has the benefit of giving educated people higher chances of influencing the outcome of election without the system becoming an oligarchy because the number of people possessing a diploma is too high to create a hegemonic class capable of influencing policies. Mill advocate that people's opinions should not have the same weight but feared that abolishing universal suffrage would create a despotic society where excluded citizens would be transformed in unthinking drones interested only in satisfying their daily routines. The British philosopher believe that the system of weighted votes was an acceptable compromise between the need to have



universal suffrage but at the same time, the institutional recognition that the opinion of a Nobel Prize winner has more weight than the opinion of an ignorant citizen.

## **V.II Restricted Suffrage**

While weighted voting assigns all citizens at least one vote, restricted voting believes uneducated citizens should not be allowed to participate in the voting process. Voting is not a natural right and therefore should be earned. It may indeed seem strange that in order to obtain a right, say to drive a car, one must first pass an exam while the right to vote is simply granted without any requirement. Just like letting incapable pilots drive or untrained surgeons operate can produce bad outcomes, so can universal suffrage.

Critics of this view may point to the difficulty of testing citizens knowledge. First of all, what is the minimum threshold in order to be competent enough to vote. Second, how should the test be structured?

The examination should of course be impartial, and it is extremely difficult to handle complex ideological issues in impartial ways. The test should therefore not deal with opinions and beliefs but rather with basic institutional knowledge or scientifically proven data. We may for example submit all citizens to the Civics Test, the exam foreigners must pass to become United States citizens, which covers important historical and governmental topics. The problem is that the test is not enough to evaluate whether a person is a competent voter.

In order to design such a test, we should take inspiration from medical ethics. One of the major issues in medical ethics, is whether patients are competent enough to take decisions on their own. If these criteria are not fulfilled and the patient may choose an option detrimental for his own health, the doctor may in some circumstances overrule the patients will. Professor Jillian Craigie (2011) identified the following criteria for competence:

- . Patients need to be aware of the relevant facts.
- . Patients must understand the relevant facts.
- . Patients need to understand the relevance of these facts for their own personal case.
- . Patients must reason about these facts in an appropriate way. <sup>129</sup>

## **V.III Enfranchisement Lottery**

Political theorist Lopez-Guerra (2014) introduces, in his book “Democracy and Disenfranchisement: The Morality of Electoral Exclusions”, an epistocratic system called

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<sup>129</sup> Craigie, J. (2011) “Competence, Practical Rationality, and What a Patient Values”. Bioethics

enfranchisement lottery.<sup>130</sup> The system starts from the opposite premise of democracy: while in democratic regimes all adult citizens have the right to vote, in enfranchisement lottery no one is entitled to vote.

The system is divided in two stages. In the first one: a representative sample of citizens is randomly selected. Secondly: the selected citizens participate in a “competence-building process” designed to educate them. This idea is profoundly different from other epistocratic regimes because rather than selecting the most competent or screen out the ignorant, Lopez-Guerra system tries to breed the most competent voters.

Critics to this view may point that breeding competent voters is significantly harder than selecting them. There may also be logistical problems in implementing the system because the process of education would require time and dedication, features most working adults do not possess. We may also reproach to the system that if it is possible to educate a group of people, society should try to educate everyone and that this is precisely the objective of the school system. If schools have already failed to produce competent voters, we may be sceptical that enfranchisement lottery system would succeed. The system also fails to deal with the risk of manipulation by teachers.

#### **V. IV Universal Suffrage with Epistocratic Veto**

Universal suffrage with epistocratic veto system is similar to contemporary democracies in the sense that all citizens enjoy the right to vote. The system empowers all citizens but keeps in check such powers in order to avoid bad decisions. The difference is the existence of an “Epistocratic council” that has the power to veto political decisions. The council cannot make new laws or initiate political actions but can only overrule decisions that do not maximize expected utility. This is a sort of protectionist mechanism against wrong choices. For example, if the population out of frustration and misconception elects an incompetent President, the council can overturn the decision and induce new elections. All citizens may apply to become members of the Epistocratic council but in order to be admitted must first pass rigorous tests in order to assess their competence.

The idea of a body whose aim is to control legislation already exists in democratic regimes. For example, the Supreme Court duty is to protect the Constitution and can overrule legislation violating fundamental rights. However, the Epistocratic council is different from such bodies and may transform the system into an oligarchy and, as previously said, ancient Greek philosophers believed a “government of the best” to be better than democracy but democracy to be better than Oligarchies. The system also risks of generating deadlocks which may obstruct the functioning of the system.

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<sup>130</sup> Lopez-Guerra, C. (2014) “Democracy and Disenfranchisement”. Oxford University Press

Tensions may arise between the population and the council if popular decisions are vetoed. The system may impede bad legislations from coming to existence, but this does not mean it will facilitate the adoption of competent laws.

### **V.V Government by Simulated Oracle**

The last epistocratic system that we will present is the most futurist and technological. Professor Scott Althaus (1998) believes that it would be possible to estimate what citizens would prefer if perfectly informed.<sup>131</sup> Under such system, the basic democratic values are respected because all citizens have equal powers and they are all entitle to vote. The collection of surveys on political preferences and citizens demographic characteristics, compared to political knowledge could predict what people would want if perfectly informed. This system has the benefit of solving the rational ignorance problem which explains why people do not acquire political information. Indeed, under such system it is not necessary for people to pay the cost of information because the Oracle is able to predict political preferences.

In an interview with Vox, Brennan proposed the following epistocratic system and describes it like this “Here’s what I propose we do: Everyone can vote, even children. No one gets excluded. But when you vote, you do three things:

First, you tell us what you want. You cast your vote for a politician, or for a party, or you take a position on a referendum, whatever it might be.

Second, you tell us who you are. We get your demographic information, which is anonymously coded, because that stuff affects how you vote and what you support.

And the third thing you do is take a quiz on very basic political knowledge. When we have those three bits of information, we can then statistically estimate what the public would have wanted if it was fully informed.”<sup>132</sup>

Some may point out that even if equal voting weight and universal suffrage are preserved, the system violates a major democratic premise, that is: the vote cannot be altered. In the system of simulated oracle, a citizen may vote for candidate A but then his vote modified by the oracle, resulting in the vote for candidate B. Doubts on the efficiency of voting predictions under full information may arise but also concerns about frauds in the redistribution of votes. One may not be fully convinced of the prediction mechanism believing that no one is in a better position to know what I prefer than myself.

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<sup>131</sup> Althaus, S. L (1998) “Information Effects in Collective Preferences”. The American Political Science Review

<sup>132</sup> Illing, S. (2018) “Epistocracy: a political theorist’s case for letting only the informed vote”. Vox Available Online at: <https://www.vox.com/2018/7/23/17581394/against-democracy-book-epistocracy-jason-brennan>

Epistocracy believes that exceptions to universal suffrage exist also in democracies. For example, democratic systems forbid underaged citizens from voting even though some teenagers may possess more knowledge than adults. Epistocracy believes that if discriminations should be made it is fairer to make them on the basis of competence and therefore meritocracy. In some fields such as medicine or law, egalitarianism not only does not exist but may also be considered harmful. Imagine the disasters that could be made if everyone had the possibility of performing medical surgeries without possessing the necessary competences. The act of voting presumes the imposition of one's will on others, and therefore such right should not be granted without requirements. The consequences of bad voting should not be underestimated. For these reasons, the Italian Constitution under Article 75 prohibits referendums on tax, budget laws and international treaties.<sup>133</sup> The Italian Founding Father feared people did not possess enough competence to deliberate on such delicate issues and therefore forbade them from voting.

Epistocrats believe the right to vote is not an inalienable natural right, such as the right to life and liberty, and therefore must be acquired just like the right to drive a car or to perform medical surgeries. Living in society presupposes the signing of a "social contract" in which citizens forsake some liberties in order to live under the rule of government. This act makes sense if living under such a government produces better outcomes than living in an anarchical State. Epistocracy therefore believes that the "social contract" entitles citizens to a right to a competent government, which may be violated if incompetent citizens influence political decisions. The right to a competent government also provides an obligation to adopt the form of government which has the best chances of maximizing expected utility, which is believed to be epistocracy.

Epistocracy responds to the critics of unfairness and discrimination by saying that the view is misleading because the system gives equal chances to all citizens to prove their competence. Epistocracy is a meritocratic system and not a discriminatory system.

The possible problem of minorities underrepresentation exists also in the medical sector but the problem should not be solved by handing out free medical licenses to all but rather by tackling the underlying injustices that impede minorities from enrolling in medical schools.

As shown by the example of the plane crash, the fairest solution does not always produce the best outcomes. Some may therefore argue that it is unfair to exclude someone from the voting process, Epistocracy responds that politics is a mean to an end where the outcomes are more important than the process and that institutions must recognize that people's opinions have different weight.

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<sup>133</sup> The Constitution of the Italian Republic (1948) Article 75. Available Online at: [https://www.senato.it/1025?sezione=127&articolo\\_numero\\_articolo=75](https://www.senato.it/1025?sezione=127&articolo_numero_articolo=75)

In the following chapter called, epistocracy leads to tyranny, we will show why in practice epistocracy would not work and why Democracy and its indisputable link to universal suffrage, is the best possible form of government.

## Chapter III: Universal Suffrage Is Not Overrated

In the previous chapter, we have presented the theory of epistocracy which advocates a rule of the knowers. According to the theory, electoral suffrage should be limited to those who prove to be worthy and competent enough to cast rational and unbiased votes.

In this next section, we will first criticise epistocracy by defending democracy and its essential link to universal suffrage. All defences of universal suffrage must first deal with the fundamental problem of political ignorance. Democracy may not be perfect, but its virtues outweighs its weakness.

Although epistocracy might be appealing to some, the theory is first of all unrealistic and secondly dangerous. The premise that selecting voters on knowledge would produce better outcomes is an assumption, while it is certain that it would result in an unfair and discriminatory system. Universal suffrage is an important check against tyranny and epistocracy may transform itself in an oligarchy with a ruling hegemonic class that perpetrates self-interest. Plus, several practical questions on how the system would be implemented, notably what counts as political knowledge and what is the acceptable threshold still remains to be answered.

According to John Dewey, democracy is “not simply and solely a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” that recognizes the contribution each citizen has on the community,<sup>134</sup> or as Alexis de Tocqueville termed it: democracy is about “equality of conditions”.<sup>135</sup> Democracy rely on the idea of equality and that no man is wise enough to rule others without their consent. The democratic concept of equality should not be confused with the belief in equality of natural endowments. Everyone agrees that people are born with different natural gifts, but these differences do not matter because democracy recognizes that all individuals are equal in rights. Although some citizens may be more informed or intelligent than others, they are all equally affected by policies and therefore should have an equal right to express their ideas. Plus, these natural inequalities may become means of oppression towards the less gifted if not compensated by an equality of opportunity.

It is also important to clarify that democracy does not celebrate ignorance, on the contrary. All democratic systems recognize the importance and necessity of education. This is the reason why school is mandatory at least until 14 to 16 years of age and free, giving all citizens the possibility to become educated. Even though the system tries to create as much informed citizens as possible, as shown in the first chapter “Why voting may lead to bad outcomes?”, not all citizens possess enough

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<sup>134</sup> Dewey, J. (1938) “Experience and Education”. Kappa Delta Pi

<sup>135</sup> Tocqueville, A. (1835) “Democracy in America”. Saunders and Otley

political information. Democracy nonetheless believes that this is a price to pay in order to guarantee equality.

Even though, as criticised by epistocracy, in democratic regimes some citizens may vote without the necessary requirements, overall democratic regimes have gotten wealthier and more stable over the years. Democracies enjoy more prosperity and freedom than ever before. The system is therefore evidently not as bad as epistocracy may suggest it to be.

We should also make a distinction between the various forms of democracies. Ancient Greek philosophers such as Socrates or Plato criticised a form of democracy that is greatly different from modern forms. Indeed, while the Athenian democracy was direct, today's parliamentary systems are indirect. Citizens do not legislate but elect representatives who then discuss and approve policies. The average citizen has an indirect voice and a limited possibility to directly influence policies.

In this chapter we will criticize epistocracy and defend Universal suffrage as a fundamental right.

In the first section called “Overcoming the problem of political knowledge”, we will present John Dewey arguments against restricted voting arguing that depriving citizens of their voting rights is unjust and counterproductive.

The second, “Estlund against weighted voting”, is a critic to Mill system of plural votes. The paragraph suggests that there are several other characteristics -that cannot be empirically tested- that can do as much harm as ignorance and the epistocratic system fails to acknowledge this.

The third section, “Immoral elitism and social turmoils” defends universal suffrage on moral grounds and believes that the abolition of the right to vote would disrupt the State stability.

The fourth “Against epistocracy paternalistic view” explains why the system may transform itself in a paternalistic society that alienate citizens.

The last section “Democracy work”, shows that despite its weakness, democracies have achieved remarkable results, making it the best possible system.

# **I. Overcoming the Problem of Political Ignorance**

All defences of universal suffrage against an epistocratic rule, must first of all deal with the fundamentals problem of overcoming political ignorance.

John Dewey recognized that it is impossible for the average citizen to be “omnicompetent” but also believed that such characteristic was not necessary. He rather regarded as necessary what he called “social knowledge” and defined it as “the ability to judge of the bearing of the knowledge supplied by others upon common concerns”.<sup>136</sup> Dewey believed that knowledge does not come from an independent observation of the world but from the interaction with it, between different minds and is cumulative in time. For example, if a worker wants to build a house, he can rely on a stock of knowledge coming from the past. John Dewey recognized the importance of experts in society because he believed that their function is to enlighten the public by providing this stock of social knowledge and not to directly govern over them. According to the author, experts must continuously devote themselves to the inquiry of “specific social problems” and “to determine how the complex and powerful forces of society actually function.” Experts do not directly frame the executive policies but provide the average citizen with the necessary knowledge in order to deal with practical issues.<sup>137</sup> Dewey, and we agree with him, believed that the exclusion of citizens from political participation was a form of suppression and subordination. The American philosopher opposed restricted suffrage because the exclusion of citizen -even if politically ignorant- deprived society of potential resources. He indeed advocated the importance of wide participation by saying “to the extent that the individual joins with others in common effort his intellectual and moral faculties are expanded.”<sup>138</sup> The positive impact of diversity in the deliberation process has also being noted by Aristotle and Mill. Aristotle wrote in “Politics, IV” that: “A democracy would do well to apply a plan of compulsory attendance for the deliberative assembly. The results are better when all deliberate together; when the populace is mixed with the notables and they, in turn, with the populace.”<sup>139</sup> Mill goes even further by suggesting that enhancement in deliberation derives from the full range of opinions and from which “the truth will out” during public discussions.<sup>140</sup> Professor Landemore argues that a diverse group of people, with different problem solving approaches, is more likely to solve a problem than an

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<sup>136</sup> Dewey, J. (1927) “The Public and Its Problems”. Swallow Pr

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 136

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 136

<sup>139</sup> Aristotle, (1995) “Politics: Books III and IV”. Clarendon Press

<sup>140</sup> Mill, J. S. (1989) “On Liberty and Other Writing”. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press



homogenous group.<sup>141</sup> Landemore illustrates her argument by citing the New Haven task force who was made up of various citizens and thanks to the diversity of their approaches managed to reduce the crime rate.

Indeed, the argument for diversity therefore refutes the epistocratic principles of restricted voting because it deprives society of valuable points of view which positively contributes to the decision-making process; and as seen because also epistocratic philosopher John Stuart Mill disagreed with restricted voting system because he feared that it would negatively transform the excluded citizens in unthinking drones interested only in satisfying their daily routines.

We have therefore seen that depriving citizens of their right to vote would be unjust and counterproductive, but what about Mill proposal of weighted votes?

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<sup>141</sup> Landemore, H. (2013) "Deliberation, cognitive diversity, and democratic inclusiveness: an epistemic argument for the random selection of representatives"

## II. Estlund Against Weighted Vote System

Professor David Estlund work is a direct criticism to Mill weighted vote system. The professor agrees with the “political value of education”, that is the assumption that an educated population, other things equal, will tend to rule wiser; but disagrees with what he called the “scholocracy thesis”, that is the argument that society should assign better educated citizens more votes. Estlund first objection to the system of weighted votes is the “demographic objection”. According to it, the well-educated may “disproportionally have epistemically damaging features that countervail the admitted epistemic benefits of education”.<sup>142</sup> For example, there may be some demographical patterns that result in the disproportional statistical representation of university applicants who will tend to inevitably be biased by their race, gender or social class. Indeed, especially in the United States, attending college is often a matter of possessing enough money to pay tuition.

Epistocracy also fails to acknowledge that ignorance is not the only characteristic that can produce bad political decisions. Indeed, professor David Estlund wrote that: “even though we must all grant that a better education improves the ability to rule wisely, it is not unreasonable or disquieted to suspect that there will be other biasing features of the educated group, features that we not yet identified and may not be able to test empirically, but which do more epistemic harm than education does good”.<sup>143</sup> Say for example that among the selected elite there is a disproportionately high number of racists and sexists. The policy enacted by this elite would probably result in discriminatory and unjust outcomes. Education is therefore important but not enough to guarantee the maximization of society’s expected utility. Other characteristics such as being evil, corrupt, malevolent or simply act in self-interest cannot be empirically tested but can do at least as much harm in politics than ignorance. For example, all main figures of the German Third Reich regime were very well educated, intelligent and knowledgeable people. Epistocracy would have therefore seen no problem in granting Goebbels, Himmler or Göring higher decision-making powers. Epistocracy clearly fails to see this point and Estlund concludes his work by saying that “If scholocracy, even in Mill’s moderate version, cannot be defended in a generally acceptable way, then I doubt that any form of epistocracy could be.”<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 117

<sup>143</sup> Estlund, D. (2009) “Democratic Authority: a Philosophical Framework”. Princeton University Press

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 117

### **III. Immoral Elitism and Social Turmoils**

Epistocracy would inevitably result in an immoral elitism. Selecting voters does not make society better off, it only makes it unfair and discriminatory, increasing already existing inequalities and tensions. Article 1 of the United Nations “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” states that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” while Article 2 specifies that “everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion”.<sup>145</sup> The “Declaration of Human Rights” is a fundamental pillar of our modern society and we believe epistocracy would violate it.

Unequal political power is a disrespect to citizens moral equality because it infringes citizens dignities and rights. Selecting those who can exercise the right to vote would result in a classification of citizens in two categories: one privileged and the other disadvantaged, creating an elitist society. This categorization of people may recall the Apartheid system of institutional racial differentiation and segregation of black people in South Africa from 1948 until the early 1990s, and therefore be absolutely unacceptable. Famous American Philosopher Robert Nozick believed that “Democratic institutions and the liberties coordinated with them are not simply effective means toward controlling the power of government and directing these toward matters of joint concern; they themselves express and symbolize, in a pointed and official way, our equal human dignity, our autonomy and powers of self-direction. We note in part as an expression and symbolic affirmation of our status as autonomous and self-governing beings whose considered judgments or even opinions have to be given equal weight to those of others”. We can also add that the selection of voters may conceal a selection of political opinions, clearly violating Article 2 of the Declaration. Under the false premise of unworthiness, the regime might select voters on the basis of whether he/she would vote for the approved candidate. This system rather than the wonderful system depicted by epistocrats would rather resemble George Orwell’s “Big Brother”.

Another argument in favour of universal suffrage is that the right to vote once granted cannot be taken away because it would result in social revolts and turmoils. Epistocracy might be buried by the same cognitive biases it hopes to overcome. The loss aversion principle holds that losing something is far worse than gaining it. For example, people usually feel worst about losing 5 euro than they feel good about gaining them. In society, once a right is granted it cannot be taken away without creating dissatisfaction and therefore protests. Dutch sociologist Max Weber was against universal suffrage

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<sup>145</sup> United Nations (1948) “Universal Declaration of Human Rights”.

Available Online at: <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

but firmly believed that once the right was granted it would be impossible to take it away. Citizens unable to vote would start to question their obedience to the State and hold the electoral results as illegitimate.

People obey the laws of the State and decide to be part of society if they feel integrated in it. Why would they feel compelled to obey the law or pay taxes to a State that does not recognize their full societal membership? Taking away the right to vote would result in infinite turmoils, disrupting the State's stability.

## IV. Against Epistocracy Paternalistic View

Epistocracy system believes -wrongfully- that an elite should have the right to make choices for everyone. This is first of all wrong from a moral point of view and secondly because it assumes that someone is in a better position to take choices that regards me than myself.

An epistocratic government creates a paternalistic society because it reproduces the parent-child dynamics. All important decisions are taken by the elite which will leave individuals in a permanent state of childhood.

Democracy is indisputably linked to universal suffrage because it is the only system that recognizes the equality of all citizens. The fundamental premise is that all citizens are equally affected by policies and therefore they should all have an equal right to express their ideas. Epistocratic paternalistic view fails to understand that even if some citizens are less naturally gifted, they are still in a better position to judge the effect policies have on them. In order to express this concept, John Dewey invokes a persuasive metaphor saying that “The man who wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches, even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied.” Indeed, even if the elite may be wiser and more intelligent, they cannot know how the average citizen feels. Granting all citizens, the right to participate in the political debate is the most efficient tool in order to protect their rights and self-interests.

In representative democracy, citizens are not directly asked to govern but rather they elect parliament members who then legislate. Therefore, it is not necessary to be omniscient in order to fulfil one's role in a democratic society. Indeed, rather than knowing all the names of 945 elected Italian members of parliament, it is more useful to know what each citizen expects from government and consequently send signals in the case such expectations are not fulfilled. This role can only be successfully fulfilled by the man who wears the shoe and not by the shoemaker. Thomas Christiano compares the role of a democratic citizen to the role of a boat owner. While the captain does the actual sailing, the owner tells the captain the desired destination. The captain is then free to calculate the road he wishes to take and at the end, if the owner is satisfied with the journey and the captain managed to bring him to the desired destination, he is reconfirmed, otherwise fired.<sup>146</sup> Just like this, citizens elect parliamentary representatives who then pass legislations. After 4 to 5 years, new elections are organized and if the citizen is not happy with the political performance of his representatives, he decides not to re-elect them.

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<sup>146</sup> Christiano, T. (2008) “The Constitution of Equality: Democratic Authority and Its Limits”. Oxford University Press

## V. Democracy Works

Although democratic decision-making system is fairer than other forms of decision making, because it recognized the equality of all human beings, we believe that this argument alone is not enough to persuasively defend democracy. Randomly flipping a coin would also be a fair system of decision, but no one would advocate its implementation. In order to effectively defend democracy against critics, we should demonstrate that democracy is better not only because it is fairer but also because of the results produced. Empirical evidence demonstrates that there is a clear link between democracies and economic growth, peace, human rights protection and an overall higher living standard.

Although it is true that the system is currently experiencing some adversities as demonstrated by the rise and spread of populist movements, democracies have generally fostered a steady and continuous economic growth which has drastically increased living conditions. Therefore, despite the presence of some ignorant voters, most democracies do much better than critics would have initially predicted. The economic evidence of the link between democracy and economic growth is irrefutable. Indeed, 9 of the 10 countries with the highest world GDP in 2019 are democracies: US, Japan, Germany, India, UK, France, Italy, Brazil and Canada; the only exception being China.<sup>147</sup> Professor Helliwell (1992) carried out a research on the empirical link between democracies and economic growth and arrived at the conclusion that “countries with higher income levels are more likely to have democratic forms of government”.<sup>148</sup> A recent study called “Democracy Does Cause Growth” co-authored by MIT economists shows that “countries switching to democratic rule experience a 20 percent increase in GDP over a 25-year period, compared to what would have happened had they remained authoritarian states”.

Democratic countries are also less likely to wage war against other democracies. The assumption is explained by the Democratic peace Theory which holds that democracies are more prudent in engaging in armed conflicts. The idea that democracies are more peaceful regimes can be first found in the work of German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Kant wrote in his essay “Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch” in 1795 that a world of only “republics” (democracies) was one of the necessary conditions for a perpetual peace.<sup>149</sup> A classic example can be found in the European

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<sup>147</sup> International Monetary Fund World Economic Outlook (2019) “Project GDP Ranking”. Statistics Times. Available Online at: <http://statisticstimes.com/economy/projected-world-gdp-ranking.php>

<sup>148</sup> Helliwell, J. F. (1992) “Empirical Linkages Between Democracy and Economic Growth”. National Bureau of Economic Research

<sup>149</sup> Kant, I. (1795) “Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch”. F. Nicolovius

continent that saw continuous tensions and bloody wars in the days of the empires. Following the end of the second world war, because of the consolidation of democratic regimes all over the continent and the birth of the European Union, the continent is enjoying the longest period of peace ever recorded.

Democratic countries have also greater respect for human rights and an overall higher living standard than non-democratic countries.

Another argument why democracies do better than expected by sceptics, is because of the difference between the art of winning an election and that of actually governing. During political campaigns, politicians often take their messages to the extreme hoping to increase their media coverage. Some declarations during electoral campaigns are voluntarily provocative and the candidate himself has little intention of implementing them if elected. Once elected, the new role implies a more cooperative and institutional approach because decision making often result in the bargaining between various interests and political actor. The need to find compromises automatically moderates actual policies. Political decisions are also the result of a bargain process between various institutions who keep a check on the actions of the executive. Indeed, this is precisely the explanation Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) provided in his famous work "Democracy in America" on why the United States democratic system works. Despite being initially sceptical about democracy, fearing the system would be transformed in a "tyranny of the majority", Tocqueville concluded that the system functioned well because there were intermediate institutions that balance power. According to the French political scientist, the main democratic concern was how to conceive freedom with equality. Tocqueville saw several dangers in democracy as for example the excessive centralization of state power determined by the elimination of barriers between the monarch ruler and the citizens. This elimination of intermediate institutions, rendered power more immediate, running the risk of becoming a "tyranny of the majority". Tocqueville also feared that democracy will lead to the growth of individualism which would push people to be more apathetic, indifferent towards government abuses and eventually transform the system in a "soft despotism".

The author believed that the spread of individuals would lead citizen to seek material wealth and sacrifice political liberties and public duties in search for it. In order to avoid these risks, society had to develop intermediate institutions that foster civil and public virtues that would lead Americans to restrain their egoism and focus on the public good instead of chasing self-interests. He believed that the antidote was civic education, building intermediate institutions and organized religion. Religion plays an important role for the French political scientist because it brought people together and made them seek less material wealth, focusing instead on the public good. Tocqueville believed that only through the creation of these institutions the equilibrium between freedom and equality could be

maintained and therefore democracy work. After studying the United States political system, Tocqueville changed his mind about democracy and acknowledge the system's ability to correct its own mistakes concluding that more fires get started in America, but also more fires get put out.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Runciman, D. (2013) "The Trouble with Democracy". The Guardian

Available Online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/nov/08/trouble-with-democracy-david-runciman>



A rule of the knowers might be appealing to some people because it gives the illusion that we can solve our problems by delegating the responsibilities to a group of experts who will magically fix them. This is a paternalistic view and an illusion which would lead to catastrophic results. Rather than the marvellous system described by epistocrats, the system would certainly transform itself in a tyranny where the ruling class only perpetuates self-interests<sup>151</sup> and transform the excluded citizens in unthinking drones interested only in satisfying their daily routines. Although we firmly believe in the importance of education and advocate that some citizen should be better educated, the chapter concludes that, in parliamentary democracies, it is not necessary for all citizens to be “omnicompetent”. We also add, that giving the complexity of modern-day issues it is impossible to always possess enough information to make rational and correct choices. Even more there is not always a clear solution that can be deduced rationally in order to solve a complex problem. It would therefore be illusory to believe that experts are never wrong, and that once power is granted to them, they would rule according to the common good maximizing expected utility. Epistocracy also fails to acknowledge that there may be other characteristics, which cannot be tested, and that do as much harm as political ignorance. There are also several practical problems in implementing the system, such as defining what political knowledge consists in and what is the acceptable threshold required in order to be considered an expert. Nevertheless, the role of the experts is fundamental in society, but it should consist in enlightening citizens, guiding them towards the right path by increasing what Dewey termed “the stock of social knowledge” rather than imposing their choices over them. Democracy is indisputably tied to universal suffrage because it is the only mean to ensure the equality of dignity and opportunity all citizens possess by virtue of birth. This does not mean that democracy does not recognize that some citizens may possess more knowledge than others. The fact is that since all citizens are equally affected by public policies and are all members of society, they should all have an equal right to express their ideas. Although the initial scepticisms about the system, overall democratic regimes have gotten wealthier and more stable over the years. Democratic regimes enjoy more prosperity and freedom than ever before. The system is therefore evidently not as bad as epistocracy suggest it to be. Tocqueville explains that the system works because there are institutional counterbalances to the power of the people. Indeed, modern representative democracies are profoundly different from the direct Athenian democracy. Citizens do not directly govern but rather elect representatives who then legislate. Their role is therefore more similar to the one of a boat owner who hires a captain to take

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<sup>151</sup> Feddersen, T.; Gailmard, S.; Sandroni, A. (2009) “A Bias Toward Unselfishness In Large Elections: Theory and Experimental Evidence”. *American Political Science Review*

him to his desired destination and then evaluates the performance of the captain. And, as illustrate by the metaphor of the shoe, no one but the citizen himself is in a better position to judge whether he is satisfied.

We may in the end conclude with the famous Winston Churchill quote: “No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Churchill, W. S. (1947). “The Worst Form of Government Quote” International Churchill Society.

Available Online at: <https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/quotes/the-worst-form-of-government/>

# Final Remarks

Modern democracies are experiencing a deep crisis in most western countries. In Germany der Große Koalition falters, Spain has voted four times in the last four years, France protests against Macron and Israel, the only Middle East democracy, voted for the third election in less than one year. This dissatisfaction with democracy is evident also in the decline of voter's participation, essential to the democratic legitimacy. In no other political system, as in democracy, citizens are required to make so many decisions and are free to exercise so many rights. These honours also entail responsibilities, such as being politically informed in order to make wise political decisions. We have heard several people advocate that the system is in crisis because average citizens are unable to exercise their democratic powers wisely and fail to fulfil their democratic responsibilities. According to them, a "rule of the knowers" also known as epistocracy, would be preferable because it would maximize societal expected utility. According to these people, universal suffrage is overrated. The aim of this thesis was to directly respond to those who believe that the average citizens are not competent enough to take political decisions and to those who advocate an epistocratic form of govern.

In this thesis, we have first analysed the current situation, studying the level of knowledge of the average citizen and the cognitive process involved in the decision-making process. The chapter argued that the average citizen lacks political knowledge, rarely makes rational choices maximizing his expected utility and often falls trap to cognitive biases.

The second chapter presented a drastic solution to the problem of political knowledge, that is a rule of the knowers also known as epistocracy. We have analysed the philosophical routes of the theory and how the system could be practically implemented in society. According to the theory, the average citizen is unsuited for the political responsibilities imposed by universal suffrage and therefore only those who prove to be competent enough to make rational decisions should be allowed to vote. While some epistocrats suggest we should completely abandon the concept of universal suffrage, others rather advocate we abandon the concept of equal voting powers and assign more votes to those who possess enough political knowledge.

In the third chapter we have strongly criticised epistocracy by advocating that the system would not maximize societal expected utility but rather result in discriminatory and unjust policies. The main idea of the theory is that the average citizen is tired of its democratic responsibilities and would rather allocate power to a rule of the wise, or to a strong man, who would magically solve all his problems. This view, other than being illusory, is dangerous because it leads to dictatorial regimes. We have then defended universal suffrage and his indisputable link with democracy, not only as the system that produces the best possible political outcomes but also as the one who protects citizens

fundamental rights and offer the best chances of economic prosperity. We have concluded with Winston Churchill's famous quote which can adequately summarise our work: "No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time", including epistocracy.

Even if we do not believe that democratic citizens are inadequate for the responsibilities imposed by universal suffrage, it is indisputable that democracies are experiencing a turbulent crisis. We have heard several comments that the crisis is due to political ignorance, and although this is an important problem that should be tackled, this line of thinking is wrong and could lead to dangerous conclusions, such as the ones we have just recalled, that universal suffrage is overrated and that we should rather implement an epistocratic rule. Indeed, the current democratic crisis cannot therefore be attributed exclusively to political ignorance and it would be a dangerous mistake to dismiss the current cry of angry people, who then vote for populist parties, exclusively as a form of ignorance, neglecting the responsibilities of the political elites. Citizens feel abandoned by their political leaders and by traditional institutions, who seem unable to provide solutions to their anxieties. Their concerns are at the basis of recent electoral results and reflect the negative consequences of the economic globalization and the development of new technologies. The automation of factories while increasing productivity, has destroyed jobs in the traditional industries with the consequence of decimating the middle class and increasing inequalities. On the other hand, Internet has permitted a small group of people to make enormous profits while employing few people. Through social medias, inequalities are even more apparent because disadvantaged people can see how the privileged live, increasing social tensions within society and the flow of migrants who travel in search of better opportunities with the consequence of putting pressure on the receiving countries infrastructures, economies and tolerance. On the other hand, political leaders and experts should acknowledge that they have failed most of their promises and lost touch with the average citizens demands rather than blame every problem on citizens ignorance. Global wealth has exponentially increased in recent years but has not been fairly redistributed creating a distinction between the privileged and the excluded from the globalization process, which inevitably has repercussion on the system. The failures of democracy are ascribable to political ignorance as much as they are to the elites failures.

The overall causes of the current democratic crisis are therefore numerous and intertwined but we have chosen here to focus on three of them, whose analysis we believe should be deepened: the economic crisis of the middle class, the end of the traditional concept of nation state power and the crisis of the information system with the declined role of traditional political institutions.

## 1. Economic pessimism.

Taking into account that the democratic system is a rule of the majority, the system functions if the overall majority of its citizens -the middle class- is well structured and economically satisfied. The middle class is therefore essential to the democratic decision-making process. Over the last decade, the middle class has undergone a process of impoverishment and western societies have seen their inequalities increase. This trend is in contrast with the steady increase of the average citizen living condition in the decades following WWII. Economy and politics are strictly correlated, and the country's economic performance is an essential element in the citizens evaluation of the government performance. We therefore believe that the current dissatisfaction with democracy can be ascribed to the deterioration of the middle-class economic conditions but most of all to the grim future economical expectations. Although most western countries are still battling with the economic consequences of the 2007 economic crisis, the overall wealth society possess, and its citizens standard of living is higher than in the marvellous decades of the economic boom. Theoretically, citizen should therefore be happier today than they were back then, but this is not the case because in those years, citizens were economically optimistic, while today they are pessimist fearing that their standard of living will decrease and that for the first time in history the future generation will be economically worse off than their parents. What really counts is therefore not a quantitative analysis but the perception of the situation.

In response to these worries, citizens look in vain to their political leaders for answers but unfortunately, politics is unable to provide a solution. They therefore feel abandoned, neglected and more prone to vote for populist parties which promise easy solutions to complex problems. A fundamental reason why the political class often lacks adequate answers to such problems is the second explanation to the current democratic crisis.

## 2. End of the traditional concept of sovereign State

One of the main reasons why the political class is unable to provide the solutions citizens are demanding is that today's problems are much more complex than they were in the past. This is primarily due to the process of globalization, which provides great new opportunities but also new challenges. Countries are today intertwined which means that a crisis in one country will probably expand globally, such as the 2007 subprime mortgage market in the United States which spread globally or the current Chinese epidemic called coronavirus. Globalization therefore ended the traditional concept of sovereign State who was able to exercise full control within its borders. Since problems are international, national governments alone are unable to provide successful answers. This further decrease confidence in political leaders who often seem inadequate to deal with the requirements of their people.

### 3. Crisis of the information system and end of traditional political representation

Mass medias and especially social networks have radically changed political communication. On one side, they are a powerful democratic tool and have strengthened the concept of equality in society. Social medias have given every citizen a voice which otherwise would have probably remained unheard. On the other side, as noted by German-American political scientist Yascha Mounk, citizens are lost with all this new information. Indeed, the information available has exponentially increased but this did not result in an equivalent increase in the average citizen knowledge nor in his capacity to exercise wise thoughts. Social networks rather than improving the democratic process have therefore generated more chaos and disinformation.

Internet is now the dominant source of information for most citizens who easily fall trap to fake news. Internet gives the possibility to all users to express their views which makes it extremely difficult to select which information is accurate and which is not. Plus, fake news are often constructed in order to be extremely captivating and the average citizen lacks the time and competence to verify the reliability of the source. The citizens perception and beliefs about certain topics can therefore be biased by fake news and have an electoral consequence. Democracy is based on the capacity of its citizens to exercise free and critical judgments, which is today more than before threatened by disinformation and manipulation.

Political leaders in order to be appealing to mass medias had to change their communication style and went from opinion leaders to opinion followers. Today's politicians are obliged to follow internet trends and always renew their communication in order to successfully fight for citizens attention. This new way of communicating surely contrasts with the traditional institutional character of earlier politicians who rather than showmen were intellectuals.

Mass media also had the effect of personalizing politics, weakening the role of political parties who in the previous decades were fundamental institutions in terms of educating the new political class and mobilizing citizens.

Safeguarding democracy is essential to preserve our values and to effectively deal with future challenges which need now, more than ever, that citizens work together. As noted by Stephen Hawking "We now have the technology to destroy the planet on which we live, but have not yet developed the ability to escape it."<sup>153</sup> In order to preserve our world we need to break down walls,

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<sup>153</sup> Hawking, S. (2016) "This is the most dangerous time for our planet". The Guardian.

Available Online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/dec/01/stephen-hawking-dangerous-time-planet-inequality>

not erect them. The challenge today is to become a modern-day Tocqueville and try to identify the possible institutional counterbalances to the democratic failures. As already said in the thesis, institutions are able to check and balance citizens will and therefore provide a partial solution to the problem but does not provide a solution on how to improve the democratic system and, as previously said, it would be a mistake to dismiss citizen anger and dissatisfaction with democratic institutions exclusively as a form of ignorance. Personally, we believe that we should act in the following three direction: regain trust in institutions, decrease inequalities and increase the level of international governance.

### 1. Trust in institutions

Education is fundamental for the well-being of the democratic systems because of the extensive decision-making powers granted to citizens. We will not tackle the problem of education in the traditional sense, but rather in term of trust.

Over the past decades, the average citizen has gotten better educated but, although this is a very positive achievement, this did not result in wiser political decisions. We therefore believe that although knowledge is important, the problem is not only education in the traditional sense. It is realistically impossible for citizens to become omniscient, therefore what really matters is how they fill their knowledge voids. We advocate that in order to successfully fight political ignorance and fake news manipulation, we should educate citizens to trust traditional knowledge institutions and experts. It is realistically impossible to teach all citizens how vaccines technically work, but what is important is that they understand that the knowledge they lack should be filled by trustworthy medical institutions or competent doctors and not gurus. It is important not to mistake equal rights and freedom of speech with equality of opinions. By these we mean that the well-funded opinion of knowledgeable experts should have a stronger weight and that citizens should regain confidence in appropriate institutions. Experts should regain an important role in society -not in forming a hegemonic ruling class as suggested by epistocracy- but in enlightening the average citizen. The major education challenge is therefore not to create omniscient citizen but in teaching them how they should fill their knowledge void.

Of course, regaining trust in institutions is a two-way process. Several corruption scandals have undermined the credibility of traditional institutions and insinuated the doubt that they served the interests of the elites rather than of the average citizen. Regaining trust in institutions also involves their improvement, their responsibilities to be honest and that they serve as examples of good governance.

### 2. Decreasing inequalities

As previously said, democracy is based on the will of the majority. It is therefore essential to have a strong middle class and keep inequalities as low as possible. While western countries have experienced an economic boom following the end of World War II which reduced inequalities and consolidated a strong middle class, today inequalities have tended to increase again. In some cases - since of it is always more difficult to have a full-time job and the enormous level of taxes that must be paid - possessing a job is not enough to be economically stable, even more if the worker must sustain a family. Today's societal fragmentation is therefore not only between those who are employment and those who are not, but between those who have a rich family heritage and those who do not.

Of course, we do not believe in the creation of a society of all equals and when this was tried throughout history, it always resulted in disastrous consequences. Inequalities are justified if they are based on merits which therefore means that all citizens must be given equal opportunities and that there must be social mobility.

If inequalities increase, society fragments itself leading to social tensions and political malaise. There cannot be a strong satisfied majority if society is divided between those privileged and those disadvantaged. We therefore advocate the necessity of working towards a just society which keeps inequalities as low as possible through social welfare schemes, the redistribution of wealth and the fight against underserved privileged.

### 3. Increasing the level of international governance

Modern day challenges are global which means that they need international solutions. National parliaments alone are unable to provide convincing answers to international problems: no country alone, for instance, can reverse global warming or stop the refugee crisis and these failures result in a perception of inadequateness of the ruling class and a loss of confidence in the democratic process. In order to effectively deal with these problems there is the necessity to foster international coordination through the creation of a global governance. In particular, we positively see the process of European Union integration and advocate that the process should not only regard the common market but also extend to the creation of common foreign and security policy, a common defence policy, a fiscal union and an improvement in the European political cooperation. For European nations, the European Union is a sort of life insurance because each country alone is too small to be internationally influential on its own. The current migration crisis and the Libyan civil war are clear examples of the inability of single European countries to solve international crisis and the need to speak with a common European voice. The alternative, in a world dominated by giants such as the United States, China and Russia, is to endure the consequences of decisions taken without our participation.



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# Summary

Democratic regimes are experiencing a deep crisis that has increased mistrust and anger towards a system that has, despite its weakness, produced a stable economic growth for decades, exponentially increased its citizens quality of life and guaranteed durable peace. This dissatisfaction with democracy is evident in the decline of voter's participation essential to the system legitimacy. Today's citizens seem to dangerously take democracy and universal suffrage for granted. While discussing the topic with some friends and acquaintances, we received an interesting feedback on why democracies were failing, that is: Universal suffrage is overrated. They argued that citizens were on average politically ignorant, easily influenced, unable to understand the complexity of political issues and therefore unsuited for the responsibilities imposed on them by universal suffrage. The increase in information available did not result in enlightened civic participation but rather in more noise, confusion and partisanship. They also eloquently pointed to the paradox that you would not board a plane knowing that the pilot is incapable of flying a plane, but democracies have no problem in letting unqualified citizens vote. Some others, pointed to the fact that citizens are different in intelligence, competence and knowledge but they all share the same number of votes. They once again pointed out to another paradox: if you are sick, you would not give the same weight to the opinion of a friend with no medical training than to a doctor; but this is exactly what happens in democracy: the vote of a Nobel Prize Winner counts as the vote of any uneducated citizen. For these reasons, they believed, democracies are not maximizing expected utility. For them, because average citizens lack political competence and knowledge, they are unsuited for the responsibilities imposed by Universal Suffrage. Universal suffrage is therefore overrated and an oligarchy or a rule by the elites would be deemed preferable.

Honestly, these two paradoxes seemed emotionally wrong -because universal suffrage is indispensable to democracy and therefore abolishing the concept of universal right to vote amount to invalidate democracy- but dangerously intriguing and therefore we felt they deserved to be deepened. Indeed, we should never underestimate the importance of voting and remember that two of history's worst dictators: Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini, were popularly elected. It is therefore essential that citizens be prepared for the responsibilities imposed by universal suffrage.

The debate about political knowledge and universal suffrage is one of the most important political philosophy debates that has been going on since ancient Greek philosopher Plato. Recently the question was reinvigorated by the current crisis of democratic representation and by an interesting book written by Professor Jason Brennan (2016) called "Against Democracy".<sup>154</sup> In his work,

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<sup>154</sup> Brennan, J. (2016) "Against Democracy" Princeton University Press

Brennan presents the idea of rethinking universal suffrage and the concept of Egalitarianism in politics. This new system would be based on the rule of the knowers and called Epistocracy. Brennan also believes that the act of voting involves an imposition of one's will on others, and that such a right should not be granted without requirements. This thesis is a direct response to the arguments we have heard from some of our friends, to those who advocate an epistocratic government and in general to all those who believe universal suffrage is overrated.

The introduction was structured in the following way: we have first justified the claim that democratic regimes are experiencing a deep crisis by providing a few examples. We have then defined democracy and explained its link with universal suffrage from an historical point of view. This helps us show that universal suffrage is a relatively new concept which should not be taken for granted. Indeed, several philosophers, from ancient Greece to 20<sup>th</sup> century political intellectuals, have been critical towards democracy and especially towards universal suffrage believing that the average citizen was not suited for such responsibilities. Among the most notable opposers to universal suffrage we find: Plato, Socrates, Locke, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Kant, Madison, Hegel, Nietzsche, Mill, Schumpeter, Lippmann and Brennan.

The first chapter, called “Are citizens politically ignorant?” dealt with the first question that must be answered before any other concept might be elaborated: Are Citizens Politically Ignorant? Critics of universal suffrage believe citizens do not fulfil their obligations to be politically informed, and that votes are rather irrational and influenced by cognitive biases. The problem therefore is not only access to information but also flaws in human cognition. In order to explain what cognitive biases are, the chapter borrowed many concepts from psychology.

After having established that average citizens are politically ignorant, the second chapter, entitled “Epistocracy” presented a drastic solution to the problem: surpass the concept of universal suffrage and create a “rule of the knowers”, known as Epistocracy. The system suggests that political outcomes would be drastically improved if only those who prove to be competent and possess enough knowledge on the subjects should have the right to vote. This could be achieved either by excluding the uneducated citizens from the voting process or by introducing a system of weighted votes.

The third chapter, titled “Universal suffrage is not overrated” defended the vital importance of universal suffrage as a guarantee of the respect of fundamental human rights and criticized epistocracy as an immoral elitist tyranny. The point is that democracy gives important responsibilities to its citizens who should be educated, but education is not enough to guarantee good governance. In

order to avoid that democracy becomes a dictatorship of the majority, universal suffrage should be integrated by some elements.

The conclusion briefly summarized the main points of the thesis and gave our personal explanation to why democracies are in crisis. We then concluded by saying that today's main challenge is that of becoming a modern Tocqueville and identify the institutional check and balance that will permit the correct functioning of democracy even if some citizens are politically ignorant and finally, provided three possible approaches to improve the system.

## **Chapter I: Are Citizens Politically Ignorant?**

Democracies imposes rights but also duties on its citizens which are asked to participate in the political life of the State. Citizens have the right to vote but this should require the obligation of being correctly informed. Critics of the universal right to vote hold that most people enjoy this right without adhering to their responsibilities of being well informed leading them to make choices that do not maximize societal expected utility. This chapter examined whether this claim is correct.

All adult citizens have an equal say in the democratic decision-making process, although they differ in the level of education and knowledge. Some citizens are more educated and intelligent than others, but these characteristics do not count in the voting polls because all citizens have the same voting weight. In no other system of government citizens are required to make so many decisions as in democracies and this puts a lot of pressure on its citizens that are not always well prepared for the task. These inadequacies may result in citizens choosing outcomes that may go against their own interests.

We highlighted several models to understand how individuals make decisions and found that citizen do not always make rational choice that maximize their expected utility. We then divided the chapter in two parts called "Political Ignorance" and "Cognitive Biases".

### **I. Political Ignorance**

#### **I.I Lack of Political Knowledge**

The section examined several statistical data that showed examples of political ignorance. The phenomenon is also much more serious than most people realize. While some citizens are well informed, others disturbingly are lacking basic political knowledge.

## I.II Rational Ignorance

In this section we have tried to understand why some citizens lacked political ignorance and found an explanation in the theory of “Rational Ignorance”. According to the theory, voters will never be well informed because it is rational to be political ignorant. The theory highlights a fundamental problem for democracy because it suggests that the cost of voting, which primarily involves the cost of being politically informed, is superior to its benefits and proposed the following equation to explain political turnout:

$$R=(B)(P)-C+D$$

Where, R is the reward an individual gain from voting

B is the assumed benefit that would derive from the election of the preferred candidate

P is the perceived probability the preferred candidate will win

C is the cost the individual incurs in voting in terms of being politically informed

D is the psychological satisfaction of voting

The theory claims that if R is positive the individual will participate in the election because rewards outweighs the costs. If R is negative, the individual will not vote and according to the “Paradox of voting”, the cost of voting will generally exceed the benefits.

French philosopher Nicolas de Condorcet and German philosopher Hegel made similar observations, fearing citizens will not endure the costs of voting. Brennan adds that some economists estimate that an individual has more chances of winning the Powerball lottery a few times in a row than casting a tie-breaking vote. All of this seem to make it rational for citizens not to sustain the cost of voting being politically informed.

## II. Cognitive Biases

Citizens are not always rational and fail to choose the alternative that would maximize their expected utility because they lack the necessary information but also because they incorrectly process information. This is known as “cognitive biases” or “psychological biases”. The section was divided according to the most common “cognitive biases” and tried to explain how people cognitively process information.

- . “Big Five personality traits” demonstrate how our personalities affect our decisions.

- . “Confirmation bias” shows that we privilege habitual thoughts, favouring information that confirm our beliefs and adopting a one-sided approach.

- . “Availability Bias” demonstrates that people are unable to correctly estimate the likelihood that an event will occur, shifting people’s perception of reality.

. “Peer pressure and Authority” reveals that people may modify their behaviour in order to conform to a group or according to the influence of an authoritarian figure.

. “Political Tribalism” refers to the strong attachment an individual may have towards a political party which may impede him to objectively view political reality.

. Other biases regarded the “Bandwagon effect”: tendency to vote for the candidate most favoured to win. The “Framing effect”: how we frame the question has consequences on the result. The “Candidate’s name order”: arrangement of candidate’s names has influence on the election’s outcome. And the “Candidate’s appearance”: Physical appearance may influence voting results.

In this first chapter, we have seen that in democracy, citizens are required to make several political decisions but that they are not always well prepared for the task. Democracy grants rights but also responsibilities which ignorant citizens neglect. Because of political ignorance and cognitive biases citizens may end up choosing outcomes that may go against their own interests. If citizens do not take seriously their political responsibility to be well informed, they damage their own self-interest and societal expected utility. This is precisely why, as shown in the introduction, so many prominent philosophers opposed the idea of universal suffrage. Ignorant citizens may therefore be considered as a threat to democracy and greatly undermine the concept of universal suffrage.

## **Chapter II: Epistocracy**

Giving this wide spread ignorance, some might view universal suffrage to be overrated and favour a “rule of the knowers”. In this chapter we introduced the concept of epistocracy which can be defined as the “rule of the knowers”. According to the theory, voting rights should be granted only to those who possess enough knowledge to make thoughtful decisions. Presumably, this form of government would maximize societal expected utility. In democracy, all citizens are equally allowed to participate in the decision-making system by electing their parliamentary representatives, but the cost of bad decisions is evenly shared across society. The act of voting presumes the imposition of one’s will on others, and epistocracy believe that such right should not be granted without requirements. Epistocracy advocates a selection of voters based on their competence and knowledge. This could be primarily achieved either by prohibiting ignorant citizens from voting or by granting multiple voting rights to those who possess more knowledge. The chapter is then divided in 5 sections.

### **I. The Philosophical Routes of Epistocracy**

Some of the most gifted minds in the history of mankind opposed democracy and were sceptical about granting the average citizen the right and responsibility to vote. The debate on the rule of the knowers dates back to Plato's philosopher-kings and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) system of plural voting. In this section, we have presented the ideas of philosophers who have shaped the epistocratic doctrine, primarily focusing on: Plato, Socrates, Mill, Lippmann and Brennan.

## **II. Why Isn't Everyone Ignorant and Why People Vote Even If Unlikely To Influence Electoral Results?**

Although we have seen in the previous chapter that most people lack basic political knowledge, in order for the government of the wise to work, there must be in society some citizens who possess knowledge. In this chapter we have tried to explain why, despite the "Paradox of voting" and the "Rational Ignorance theory", some citizens are well educated and vote. Several factors such as the level of education, demographic, social and psychological factors may influence election turnouts. Voting is an essential procedure for the survival of democracy, and fortunately when deciding whether to vote not all citizens think in terms of personal costs and benefits. To some people, the moral duty to participate in the political decision-making process outweighs the cost benefits calculus.

## **III. Right to a Competent Government**

For epistocrats, the outcome is more important than the process and because we have a right to a competent government, we should adopt the system that guarantees the best outcome regardless of the fairness of the process. Living in a society, under the rule of a government is a form of social contract. We agree to limit our freedom of action obeying laws and leave the "state of nature" because living under the rule of a government produces better results than living in pure anarchy. Epistocrats argue that the signing of the social contract entitled us to a competent government. Some critics point out that epistocracy has too much faith in experts believing that they are never wrong and are sceptical whether giving full powers to experts would actually result in a competent government who maximizes societal expected utility.

## **IV. Democratic Voting Age Restriction**

Epistocrats believe that since voting presumes the imposition of one's will on others, such right should not be granted without requirements. In modern democracies, the only voting

requirement is related to age because children are unable to understand the complexity of political issues and may easily be influenced. Epistocracy disagrees that such characteristics are peculiar to children and advocate that all those who possess them, independently of age, should not be allowed to vote.

Critics acknowledge the importance of being politically informed but point out that there might be underlying differences in the education system which would result in an underrepresentation of minorities in the voting pools. Indeed, for example in the United States going to college is often a matter of possessing enough money to pay for tuition. Epistocracy would therefore only aggravate these underlying differences.

## **V. What Epistocratic Regimes May Look Like**

### **V.I Weighted Voting**

The system proposes to assign citizen who possess enough political knowledge additional votes but fails to identify what political knowledge is indispensable to make rational political choices.

### **V.II Restricted Suffrage**

The restricted voting system believes uneducated citizens should not be allowed to participate in the voting process but among many critics, fails to identify what is the necessary threshold in order to be considered politically educated and how to evaluate it.

### **V.III Enfranchisement Lottery**

Political theorist Lopez-Guerra proposes we randomly choose a representative sample of citizens and educate them in order to make rational political choices and then ask them to elect a government. Among the various critics to this view, we might object that breeding competent voters is significantly harder than selecting them.

### **V. IV Universal Suffrage with Epistocratic veto**

Propose we let everyone vote but then an Epistocratic council may veto their political decisions if deemed harmful. The problem is that tensions may arise between the population and the council if popular decisions are vetoed. The system may impede bad legislations from coming to existence, but this does not mean it will facilitate the adoption of competent laws.

### **V.V Government by Simulated Oracle**

The system estimates what citizens would prefer if perfectly informed and modify their vote if not in accordance to the citizens rational preferences. Some may point out that even if equal voting weight and universal suffrage are preserved, the system violates a major democratic premise, that is: the vote



cannot be altered. One may not be fully convinced of the prediction mechanism believing that no one is in a better position to know what I prefer than myself.

## **Chapter 3: Universal Suffrage Is Not Overrated**

In this chapter, we have criticised epistocracy by defending democracy and its essential link to universal suffrage.

Although epistocracy might be appealing to some, the theory is first of all unrealistic and secondly dangerous. The premise that selecting voters on knowledge would produce better outcomes is an assumption, while it is certain that it would result in an unfair and discriminatory system. Universal suffrage is an important check against tyranny and epistocracy may transform itself in an oligarchy with a ruling hegemonic class that perpetrates self-interest. Plus, several practical questions on how the system would be implemented, notably what counts as political knowledge and what is the acceptable threshold still remains to be answered.

As noted by John Dewey, democracy is much more than a form of government. It is a way of living which protects fundamental human rights. Democracy rely on the idea of equality and that no man is wise enough to rule others without their consent. The democratic concept of equality should not be confused with the belief in equality of natural endowments. Everyone agrees that people are born with different natural gifts, but these differences do not matter because democracy recognizes that all individuals are equal in rights. Although some citizens may be more informed or intelligent than others, they are all equally affected by policies and therefore should have an equal right to express their ideas. Plus, these natural inequalities may become means of oppression towards the less gifted if not compensated by an equality of opportunity. Even though, as criticised by epistocracy, in democratic regimes some citizens may vote without the necessary requirements, overall democratic regimes have gotten wealthier and more stable over the years. Democracies enjoy more prosperity and freedom than ever before. The system is therefore evidently not as bad as epistocracy may suggest it to be. The chapter has then being divided in 5 sections.

### **I. Overcoming the Problem of Political Ignorance**

All defences of universal suffrage against an epistocratic rule, must first of all deal with the fundamentals problem of overcoming political ignorance. It is also important to clarify that democracy does not celebrate ignorance, on the contrary. All democratic systems recognize the importance and necessity of education. John Dewey recognized that it is impossible for the average citizen to be “omnicompetent” but also believed that such characteristic was not necessary. He rather

regarded as necessary what he called “social knowledge” and defined it as “the ability to judge of the bearing of the knowledge supplied by others upon common concerns”.<sup>155</sup> Experts should not directly frame the executive policies, as advocated by epistocracy, but provide the average citizen with the necessary knowledge in order to deal with practical issues. Dewey, and we agree with him, believed that the exclusion of citizens from political participation was a form of suppression and subordination. The American philosopher opposed restricted suffrage because the exclusion of citizen -even if politically ignorant- deprived society of potential resources. We have then shown the positive impact of diversity in the deliberation process has also been noted by Aristotle, Mill and professor Landemore.

## **II. Estlund Against Weighted Vote System**

Professor David Estlund work is a direct criticism to Mill weighted vote system. The professor agrees with the “political value of education”, that is the assumption that an educated population, other things equal, will tend to rule wiser; but disagrees with what he called the “scholocracy thesis”, that is the argument that society should assign better educated citizens more votes. Estlund first objection to the system of weighted votes is the “demographic objection”. Say for example that among the selected elite there is a disproportionately high number of racists and sexists. The policy enacted by this elite would probably result in discriminatory and unjust outcomes. Education is therefore important but not enough to guarantee the maximization of society’s expected utility. Other characteristics such as being evil, corrupt, malevolent or simply act in self-interest cannot be empirically tested but can do at least as much harm in politics as ignorance. For example, all main figures of the German Third Reich regime were very well educated, intelligent and knowledgeable people. Epistocracy would have therefore seen no problem in granting Goebbels, Himmler or Göring higher decision-making powers.

## **III. Immoral Elitism and Social Turmoils**

Epistocracy would inevitably result in an immoral elitism. Selecting voters does not make society better off, it only makes it unfair and discriminatory, increasing already existing inequalities, tensions and violating fundamental human rights. Unequal political power is a disrespect to citizens moral equality because it infringes citizens dignities and rights. Selecting those who can exercise the right to vote would result in a classification of citizens in two categories:

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<sup>155</sup> Dewey, J. (1927) “The Public and Its Problems”. Swallow Pr

one privileged and the other disadvantaged, creating an elitist society. American Philosopher Robert Nozick point out that democratic liberties and institutions are not only means to control the governmental powers but also as a way to affirm one's own status as self-governing human beings with equal dignity.

Another argument in favour of universal suffrage is that the right to vote once granted cannot be taken away because it would result in social revolts and turmoils. People obey the laws of the State and decide to be part of society if they feel integrated in it. Why would they feel compelled to obey the law or pay taxes to a State that does not recognize their full societal membership? Taking away the right to vote would disrupt the State's stability.

## **IV. Against Epistocracy Paternalist View**

The epistocratic system believes -wrongfully- that an elite should have the right to make choices for everyone. This is first of all wrong from a moral point of view and secondly because it assumes that someone is in a better position to take choices that regards me than myself. An epistocratic government creates a paternalistic society because it reproduces the parent-child dynamics. All important decisions are taken by the elite which will leave individuals in a permanent state of childhood.

Democratic fundamental premise is that all citizens are equally affected by policies and therefore they should all have an equal right to express their ideas. John Dewey invokes a persuasive metaphor saying that "The man who wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches, even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied." Indeed, even if the elite may be wiser and more intelligent, they cannot know how the average citizen feels. Granting all citizens, the right to participate in the political debate is the most efficient tool in order to protect their rights and self-interests. A rule of the knowers might be appealing to some people because it gives the illusion that we can solve our problems by delegating the responsibilities to a group of experts who will magically fix them, but this would lead to catastrophic results.

In representative democracies, citizens are not directly asked to govern but rather they elect parliament members who then legislate. Therefore, it is not necessary to be omniscient in order to fulfil one's role in a democratic society. Indeed, rather than knowing all the names of 945 elected Italian members of parliament, it is more useful to know what each citizen expects from government and consequently send signals in the case such expectations are not fulfilled. This role can only be successfully fulfilled by the man who wears the shoe and not by the shoemaker. Thomas Christiano compares the role of a democratic citizen to the role of a boat owner. While the captain does the actual sailing, the owner tells the captain the desired destination. The captain is then free to calculate the

road he wishes to take and at the end, if the owner is satisfied with the journey and the captain managed to bring him to the desired destination, he is reconfirmed, otherwise fired. Just like this, citizens elect parliamentary representatives who then pass legislations. After 4 to 5 years, new elections are organized and if the citizen is not happy with the political performance of his representatives, he decides not to re-elect them.

## **V. Democracy Works**

Although democratic decision-making system is fairer than other forms of decision making, because it recognized the equality of all human beings, this argument alone is not enough to persuasively defend democracy. We would defend democracy, with its inevitable link to universal suffrage, not only because it is the fairest system but also because of its positive outcomes.

Indeed, empirical evidence demonstrates that there is a clear link between democracies and economic growth, peace, human rights protection and an overall higher living standard. The system is therefore evidently not as bad as epistocracy may suggest it to be. We have here shown some of the remarkable results obtained by democracy such as:

- . The democratic countries steady and continuous economic growth which has drastically increased living conditions.
- . Democratic countries are also less likely to wage war against other democracies. Kant wrote in his essay “Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch”.
- . Democratic countries have also greater respect for human rights and an overall higher living standard than non-democratic countries.

Additional argument why democracies do better than expected by sceptics, is because of the difference between the art of winning an election and that of actually governing. The need to find compromises automatically moderates actual policies.

Political decisions are also the result of a bargain process between various institutions who keep a check on the actions of the executive. Indeed, this is precisely the explanation Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) provided in his famous work “Democracy in America” on why the United States democratic system works. Despite being initially sceptical about democracy, fearing the system would be transformed in a “tyranny of the majority”, Tocqueville concluded that the system functioned well because there were intermediate institutions that balance power.

We may in the end conclude with the famous Winston Churchill quote: “No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”<sup>156</sup>

## Final Remarks

Modern democracies are experiencing a deep crisis in most western countries. In no other political system, as in democracy, citizens are required to make so many decisions and are free to exercise so many rights. These honours also entail responsibilities, such as being politically informed in order to make wise political decisions. We have heard several people advocate that the system is in crisis because average citizens are unable to exercise their democratic powers wisely and fail to fulfil their democratic responsibilities. According to them, a “rule of the knowers” also known as epistocracy, would be preferable because it would maximize societal expected utility. According to these people, universal suffrage is overrated. The aim of this thesis was to directly respond to those who believe that the average citizens are not competent enough to take political decisions and to those who advocate an epistocratic form of govern. We have in the end concluded that universal suffrage is not overrated, on the contrary it is indispensable.

Although we have seen that the average citizen lacks political knowledge, the current democratic crisis cannot be attributed exclusively to political ignorance and it would be a dangerous mistake to dismiss the current cry of angry people, who then vote for populist parties, exclusively as a form of ignorance, neglecting the responsibilities of the political elites. Citizens feel abandoned by their political leaders and by traditional institutions, who seem unable to provide solutions to their anxieties. Their concerns are at the basis of recent electoral results and reflect the negative consequences of the economic globalization and the development of new technologies. The overall causes of the current democratic crisis are therefore numerous and intertwined but we have chosen to focus on three of them: Economic pessimism, end of the traditional concept of sovereign state and the crisis of the information system and end of traditional political representation.

To these, we have presented three guidelines: regain citizen trust in institutions, decrease inequalities and increase the level of international governance.

Safeguarding democracy is essential to preserve our values and to effectively deal with future challenges which need now, more than ever, that citizens work together. In order to preserve our world, we need to break down walls and not erect them. Leaders and experts should acknowledge

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<sup>156</sup> Churchill, W. S. (1947). “The Worst Form of Government Quote” International Churchill Society.

Available Online at: <https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/quotes/the-worst-form-of-government/>

that they have failed most of their promises and lost touch with the average citizens demands rather than blame every problem on citizens ignorance. Global wealth has exponentially increased in recent years but has not been fairly redistributed creating a distinction between the privileged and the excluded from the globalization process, which inevitably had repercussion on the system. The failures of democracy are ascribable to political ignorance as much as it is to the elites failures. If we can learn from our mistakes, regaining a measure of humility, we can be optimist about the future challenges laying ahead.