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**DEMOCRACY AND THE RULE OF KNOWLEDGE**

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*To my family*

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## **Introduction – The Doors of Melos**

«The Melians did not give them access to the people at large,  
but required them to state their business before  
the authorities and the privileged few.  
The Athenian envoys began as follows»  
Thucydides

### *Starting Point*

Thucydides tells that during the Peloponnesian War, a long and dramatic dialogue took place between the representatives of the island of Melos and those of Athens. The Melians were Spartan colonists who, unlike other peoples, did not submit to Athenian domination, deciding to remain neutral and take no part in the war. Athens, however, did not accept Melos' neutrality in the conflict with Sparta because feared that tolerating such neutrality would have given a signal of weakness to the peoples already subjected. Melos had thus to choose between submitting to the powerful interlocutor or fighting for its own autonomy. The fate of the island of Melos depended on the dialogue with the Athenians and on the decision taken in the face of this request. However, the dialogue, although it concerned the fate of each inhabitant of the island, could not be public. The Melians asked the Athenian legates to confer only with oligarchs and magistrates, far from the people and their judgment. It was belief of Melian rulers that the inhabitants would not have been able to make that crucial decision, that they would have been bamboozled by enemies' words and not understand. Athens's representatives accepted, the doors were closed, and the dialogue could begin.

People, public decisions, and the doors (to be closed). Thucydides' dialogue offers a clear image to frame the theme of this research. The work aims to analyze the

relationship between the political decision-making process and the people's capacity to understand the problems involved in the decisions to be made. On the island of Melos, the doors of public decisions were closed because the representatives of Melos' community believed that the people could not understand what was really at stake. In front of Athenians' words, the demos would have been deceived or seduced and would have ended up deciding *wrongly*. For this reason, the notables of Melos thought it was more appropriate to let the *knowers* decide. Those, in a nutshell, who would have made the *right* choice.

Two thousand five hundred years after the Peloponnesian War and the dialogue between the Melians and the Athenians, the problem of the doors of public decisions continues to recur. Even in democracy, the temptation to close the doors and allow the knowers to decide continues to reappear in new and seductive forms. The year 2016 was significant for those who would close or, at least, ajar the doors of Melos. Brexit in the UK, the election of Trump in the USA, and – above all – the public debate that preceded them, have brought the attention of many scholars to people's poor understanding of public decisions. As the Melians did, someone wondered why not relieve the people from making such decisions by restricting the access to political process. Citizens, in fact, appear rather distracted. Advocates of *epistocracy* – Jason Brennan, Bryan Caplan, Ilya Somin, Claudio López-Guerra, Daniel Bell, and Garrett Jones – articulate a similar theoretical proposition.

This work starts from the analyses of epistocratic theorists and, especially in the first three chapters, tries to give an account of their criticisms towards democracy (chapter 1), develop their concept of political knowledge (chapter 2), and define the role of people's political knowledge (episteme) within democratic paradigm (chapter 3). According to epistocracy, the inclusion into political decision-making *must not* be separated from epistemic qualities of decision-makers and, therefore, whoever is unwilling or unable to understand the problems of politics *should* not be allowed to decide on such problems. This reading of episteme within democratic decision-making

is the input to start this research, which would radically reassess the rule of knowledge in politics and the temptation to close Melos' doors.

### *Aims*

As noted by the first readers of epistocratic arguments, epistocracy acts like a stone in the pond of normative democratic theory. The epistocracy is an opportunity to understand that democracy represents a rich and demanding model of decision-making, that is, a philosophy of government that implies a philosophy of citizenship. In other words, the choice and commitment to be democratic implies onerous assumptions which, the epistocrats remind us, cannot be ignored or forgotten. Either these commitments are recognized and honored, or democracy runs the risk to be perceived as a *mise-en-scene* that can be easily replaced by alternative models of decision-making.

Democracy is not a free lunch and has two crucial preconditions: the centrality of the demos as political decision-maker and the epistemic side of political decision-making itself. From this point of view, the “little” knowledge people have about politics is relevant because raises doubts about a possible short-circuit of democratic model, where the centrality of the people as decision-makers is accompanied by their inability to even understand the staple aspects on which they are called to express their will. Epistocratic criticism spotlights people’s epistemic burden as an implicit and constitutive aspect of democratic practice. In this light, the epistemic posture of the demos represents a peculiar field where normative expectations towards democracy arise. In fact, deciding has an epistemic dimension, that is, cognitive aspects composing the informational terrain on which decision-maker operates. Political decisions involve people’s “foreground elements” (moral values, personal experiences, interests) but also “background elements”, namely, key information about the democratic environment wherein citizens act as political decision-makers.



Democracy as a philosophy of citizenship grounds on the political agency of the citizenship, that is, people's ability to pour their moral convictions and interests into the decision-making process together with their understanding of reality. As seen, political agency of the people also incorporates an epistemic agency. Knowledge, in fact, allows people to get into the democratic game, providing them the necessary empowerment to act as decision-makers.

Episteme thus plays a crucial role in the political process and embodies an essential value for democracy. Making people knowledgeable, albeit modestly, is a requirement that democracy must fulfill. The epistocracy brings this point to the extreme, ending up absolutizing the power of the episteme as a guarantee of *just* decisions and institutionalizing the access to public decisions to knowers alone. On the contrary, the analysis argues that valorization of episteme should not be coupled with this reductionist drift. Knowledge represents a resource that enables citizens to act as decision-makers, without transforming them into knowers who can ensure *right* decisions and *satisfactory* outcomes. The importance of episteme and its dissemination in democratic society cannot be left exclusively to the dynamism of individuals, democratic institutions must take on this task. In this regard, the form of the democratic process must institutionalize the epistemic empowerment of citizens, so that they are able to open the doors of public deliberation and act as political decision-makers.

### *Arguments*

The work sets forth three arguments.

The first argument is descriptive and concerns the meaning of political knowledge, or episteme, in the democratic paradigm. The episteme must be understood as the factual knowledge of politics in three fundamental areas: the rules of the game, the cruxes of public debate, the actors of politics (politicians and parties). Given the complexity of contemporary politics, a certain degree of ignorance is easily foreseeable and is therefore tolerable. The normative expectation of the people as an epistemic agent is

identified by the threshold of epistemic insouciance, that is, the indifference to whether their political beliefs and statements have any basis in reality. Such a cognitive posture is in fact the negation of the political and epistemic agency that democracy assumes as the condition of possibility of people's self-government. The episteme therefore concerns the "background elements" of politics and approaches the "foreground elements" that instead capture the moral identity of the individuals. Certainly, the episteme can influence and guide moral deliberation. However, the two dimensions do not coincide. Furthermore, contrary to what the epistocracy assumes, the episteme is qualified as an procedural value. Taken as instrumental value, episteme is technical knowledge, knowledge about the rights answers, which makes discussion unnecessary and leads to action. Taken as procedural value, episteme is instead knowledge about political modest and reliable "facts". In politics, this kind of knowledge enriches political deliberation, which remains necessary, inclusive, and open-ended. Borrowing Jasanoff's concept, episteme transmits a body of "serviceable truths", i.e., «state of knowledge that satisfies tests of scientific acceptability and supports reasoned decision-making, but also assures those exposed to risk that their interests have not been sacrificed on the altar of an impossible scientific certainty» (Jasanoff 1990: 250).

The second argument is normative and represents the attempt to place the episteme in the procedural interpretation of democracy. From this point of view, democracy can be understood as an "enlightened procedure". In fact, episteme finds its *raison d'être* as procedural value by realizing people's capacity to understand reality and decide accordingly. In this sense, democracy possesses a tangible epistemic side and derives political authority by institutionalizing human capacity to formulate and consider modest truths ("serviceable truths") concerning the context in which operate as decision-makers. Enlightened proceduralism argues that democracy derives its legitimacy from the protection of equal freedom in a context of permanent disagreement, by trusting human capacities to understand reality and decide accordingly. In this view, democratic rule ensures everyone an "equal say" in political process and such a "say" counts as recognition that individuals are not chained by

instincts neither forced to act randomly. Rather, “equal say” grounds on human capacity to formulate and value imperfect but reliable truths about their world. Equal say is always also an “enlightened say”.

The third argument is institutional and constitutes the counterproposals to the corrective measures outlined by the epistocrats. Democratic institutions have the duty to empower the citizenship, to carry out the action of developing citizens’ political capacity to act as decision-makers by transforming the assumption of equal competence into the commitment to spread political knowledge. Commitment of institutions represents a key passage. Indeed, the strength of individuals to get better and become knowledgeable decision-makers is limited. Certain epistemic obligations (e.g., grasping and spreading “serviceable truths” for politics) cannot be left in hands individuals alone, only “group agents” measure up. For this reason, equal competence in political action – false in reality – appears as more sustainable premise if institutions (and not the citizens) take this commitment as an obligation. The epistemic empowerment of citizens is an obligation already incorporated by liberal democracy. Both liberal and social rights embody the institutional means for disseminating information and knowledge of politics in society, by protecting the freedom of individuals to expose themselves to several viewpoints and by offering the citizens public granted paths (e.g., schooling) to enhance their epistemic capability. However, a second institutional device must be added to this existing effort. The form of the democratic decision-making process must be oriented towards the obligation for the institutions to spread the episteme. To this aim, two possible corrective measures are taken into consideration: compulsory voting and the “visible hand” of the experts as both polestar and filter in the public deliberation.

### *Overview*

The first chapter tries to account for the epistocratic critique of democracy. Epistocratic theorists, in particular Brennan, Somin and Caplan, characterize the democratic demos

as a “little demos” who, politically ignorant and rationally irrational, turns out to be a careless and unreliable decision-maker (section 1). Democratic society, these authors argue, creates the conditions for such epistemic littleness. Tolerance towards an extra-political conception of virtue and the mass participation of contemporary societies tolerate and, at times, encourage a certain degree of civic and epistemic disengagement. In this sense, the political ignorance of a large part of the people appears as a phenomenon that is difficult to overcome (section 2). The epistocrats also warn about the reliability of the mechanisms of collective aggregation. Three theorems on the intelligence of the masses (the Miracle of Aggregation, Condorcet’s jury theorem and Hong-Page’s theorem) are in fact severely tested by the factual evidence on the high level of political ignorance of democratic citizens (section 3).

The second chapter tries to define the concept of political ignorance/knowledge. To do this, we dwell on the data deriving from empirical research on the US and Italian electorate (section 1). The episteme as political knowledge is first defined by identifying its domains, that is, aspects that citizens should consider in forming their political positions. In particular, we shall focus on knowledge about the rules of the game, the cruxes of the public debate and the actors of the political scene (parties and candidates) (section 2). Following section draws on recent studies on the epistemology of ignorance. The threshold of blame for the political ignorance of citizens shall be characterized through the concept of “epistemic insouciance”. The notion of political knowledge that is assumed therefore concerns the facts of politics and demands that citizens engage with that information by winning insouciance (section 3). Final section considers the role of morality in the knowledge of politics. Following the pattern of knowledge assumed by the epistocrats, the concluding pages of the chapter shall defend the need for an analytical distinction between politically ignorant citizens and morally evil ones. Morality and episteme represent intercommunicating but distinct spheres which respectively illuminate the foreground and background elements in the political deliberation of individuals (section 4).

The third chapter deals with the role of episteme within democratic paradigm. Beginning section focuses on the epistocratic interpretation of the role of knowledge in the democratic process. Epistocrats argue that political ignorance reveals the reluctance of large part of the demos to accept the implications of decision-making and, with that, uncovers the betrayal of the inspiring values of the democratic ideal (section 1). Epistocracy assumes an instrumentalist understanding of democracy and the role of political knowledge. From this point of view, democracy must be interpreted as a tool for arriving at right decisions, which can be known by knowledgeable people. For this reason, power is submitted to knowledge as the lodestar of public decisions. However, instrumentalism becomes possible if an “epistemic reductionism” is embraced, where political process is interpreted as a mere chain of cognitive problems and technical evaluations. Politics is thus reduced to mere technique and an unlikely conception of episteme is assumed, where right ends and means of collective action are always clear and knowable (section 2). On the other hand, the proceduralist perspective opposes instrumentalism, and understands democracy as a procedure that protects the equal freedom of citizens in a context of persistent disagreement on the decisions to be taken. Democratic proceduralism tends to be anti-epistemic, to consider the appeal to knowledge as a Trojan horse, which would introduce the commitment to truth and epistemic accuracy into society and discriminate against less informed citizens by referring to criteria of objectivity (section 3). The fourth section aims to present the episteme as modest body of “serviceable truths” that enlightens the debate on public decisions without presenting the “smoking gun” on what is right to do. Democracy should thus be understood as an enlightened procedure which, alongside the protection of equal freedom in a context of perennial disagreement, recognizes and enhances citizens’ political and epistemic agency, that is, human ability to produce modest truths about the world and decide accordingly (section 4).

The fourth chapter examines the institutional attempts to translate enlightened proceduralism into an institutional model. The first section reconnects to the analysis of chapter 3 and returns to the centrality of the people and the epistemic side of

decision-making as characterizing aspects of democracy. This, in turn, links democracy as philosophy of government to democracy as philosophy of citizenship and encourages to concentrate on institutional design to better protect and realize people's political agency (section 1). The analysis shows how the empowerment of citizens is an obligation already incorporated by liberal democracy. The section focuses on the role of liberty and social rights (in particular the right to education). Liberty rights as a permanent barrier against harmful consequences in the exercise of one's epistemic agency pave the way to the development of that epistemic agency, both through the exposure to several viewpoints and the possibility of engaging in trials and errors process of understanding. On the other hand, social rights guarantee the people means and resources to develop their epistemic agency, improve their understanding of politics, and be enlightened about the stakes (section 2). Besides rights, the democratic process itself could be oriented towards the purpose of providing people an epistemic empowerment to get into the game and act as political decision-makers. Two possible institutional devices are considered. The first is compulsory voting. Compulsory voting would refine the democratic procedure and make it more like an enlightened procedure, as citizens are encouraged to be aware of their role in the procedure itself by participating in it. Furthermore, compulsory voting represents a stimulus to overcome political insouciance and orient citizens towards political knowledge. The second remedy is the "visible hand" strategy, that is, the creation of independent experts' agencies that would act in the public debate as the institutional device to spread serviceable truths. The combination of mandatory participation and the creation of institutions charged with making the factual problems underlying political choices understandable would be a possible institutional translation of the theoretical ideal of enlightened proceduralism (section 3). Final section anticipates and responds to criticisms on the substance and method of the proposed institutional design. In particular, concluding pages will try to highlight the procedural nature of the proposed measures and address the risk of elitism behind institutional proposals at hand (section 4).

## Chapter 1

### The Little Demos of Epistocrats

«It is not “unenlightened” to say  
that most people are unenlightened»

Bryan Caplan

The chapter aims to present the problem of political ignorance in democratic framework through the critical reconstruction outlined by the epistocratic theorists. Particularly, the analysis follows the reflections of Brennan, Somin and Caplan. According to their reading, democracy encounters a profound challenge in political ignorance that spotlights the unreliability of the demos as a political decision-maker. Such epistemic reflection in contexts of political decision-making appears as a contemporary reformulation – supported by empirical approach – of Platonic skepticism towards the amateurism of the demos.

Overall, the research considers the depiction of little demos provided by these authors an important stimulus for debate on democracy and shares the concern of these scholars about the significant distance of many citizens from the staples of the political deliberation. Nonetheless, the chapter also attempts to provide additional elements and fundamental premises to figure out the nature of political ignorance, elements which will be crucial in following chapters. In a nutshell, if research underscores the importance of epistocrats’ *pars destruens* – which is exposed in these pages – it decisively diverges from their *pars construens* – which is discussed in third chapter.

The first section summarizes Brennan’s denunciation of the democratic people’s lack of political knowledge. This lack, according to the American author, constitutes the Achilles heel of the democratic system. Political ignorance represents an umbrella-term to characterize the epistemic posture of citizen-hobbits (ignorant) and citizen-hooligans

(irrational). The *other* demos, cognitively responsive to the themes of the democratic process, is not made up exclusively of a handful of brilliant citizen-Vulcans (as Brennan argues) but also encompasses modestly informed citizens whom we shall refer to as “Muggles”.

The second section deals with the causes, or incentives, to political ignorance. Given that the structural limitation of the mind is not ultimate obstacle to obtain a modest degree of political knowledge, the analysis focuses on two traits of contemporary democracy that tolerate or encourage political ignorance. The first theme is represented by an extra-political conception of civic virtue which finds its place in the pluralism of values which contemporary democracy guarantees. The second theme instead concerns the phenomena of rational ignorance and rational irrationality triggered by mass participation in the contemporary democratic process.

The third section considers the objection that it would make no sense to focus on the ignorance of individuals if democracy proved its intelligence as an aggregation of multiple voices. In the footsteps of Aristotle, three theorems on the so-called “collective intelligence” are examined: the miracle of aggregation, Condorcet’s jury theorem and Hong-Page’s theorem. Following the epistocratic approach, the investigation highlights how the ignorance of individuals and its systematic nature constitute serious threats to the functioning of these theorems in the real development of democratic practice.

## **1. Hobbits, Hooligans, Vulcans and Muggles**

### *People as the Achille’s Hell of Democracy*

No one more clearly and more harshly than the American scholar Jason Brennan has expressed concerns and raised doubts about the ability of the democratic demos to make sound political decisions by participating in political decision-making. In his analyses of democratic decision-making, Brennan has severely criticized the way



electorate resorts to universal suffrage to express superficial, unfounded, even false and immoral beliefs (Brennan 2011b, 2014, 2016, 2019a, 2019b). To recall Brennan's expression, citizens are used to "pollute the polls" (Brennan 2009) with their ignorance of public issues, making use of their little portion of political power to advocate proposals, support candidates or boost parties. Even more, the problem of citizens' political ignorance persists after voting. Hence, public officials encounter several hardships in representing voters who are misinformed of politics and even of their own interests (Hardin 2000, 2004). Accordingly, political ignorance embodies not only a problem on election days, but rather a critical element in the way people participate in democratic deliberation and decision-making.

In the course of this chapter, the analysis of Brennan and other *epistocratic* theorists – Caplan and Somin in particular – will often be used to present the problem of political ignorance in the democratic paradigm. The interest on the issue of ignorance was in fact strongly rekindled by these scholars who, in addition to developing a critical perspective on democracy, also advanced alternative normative proposals by leveraging the epistemic problems in question. By epistocracy is meant the need to distribute political power according to individuals' political knowledge (or *episteme*). Epistocrats proposals shall be considered further, in chapter 3, after the problem of little of deos and the notion of "political ignorance" are better defined (for more detailed discussion of epistocrats' understanding of democracy see chapter 3, sections 1 and 2). The thesis of the "little demos" therefore reflects the critical perspective from which the epistocrats move and introduces the reflection on democracy and episteme encouraged by their intuitions.

The deep political ignorance affecting people in democracy has nothing surprising for researchers in this field. By contrast, the evidence of public unawareness about political issues astonishes laymen – as for instance noted Somin. «The sheer depth of most individual voters' ignorance is shocking to many observers not familiar with the research» (Somin 2013: 17). In fact, political theorists have begun to collect data surveys and statistics on people political knowledge after World War II, especially in

the USA. Brennan develops his reflection by largely relying on the empirical works of scholars such as Converse, Delli Carpini, Keeter, Althaus and Bartels. The present investigation in turn picks up the baton from that tradition and mostly focuses on the data from American surveys, since the USA are the most scrutinized country among Western societies on this specific issue.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the empirical data has limited relevance within this analysis of political ignorance. In fact, following Brennan and other theorists, the aim of the investigation is to reflect on political ignorance's normative consequences for democratic theory. In this regard, reporting and comparing the different levels of political ignorance in Western democracies goes beyond the philosophical interests of this monograph. Obviously, statistical data should not be underestimated. They can show the notions people fail to know and, more important, allow to develop an "epistemology of ignorance" in order to shed light over the normative implications for democratic theory. As such, although far from being the core of the analysis, the investigation does not overlook survey data and set them in a broader epistemological inquiry aimed at providing a definition of "political ignorance/knowledge" of democratic people (see chapter 2).

Brennan's reflection on political ignorance delves into the relation between democratic decision-making and the role played by democratic demos. To anticipate Brennan's conclusion, political ignorance reveals that democratic demos is *little*: people have little knowledge, little rationality, and little interest to be the keystone of political decision-making. In this view, indications like abstention or decrease of political activism are understood by Brennan as good news: the lower the involvement of the people, the better the functioning of democracy; the less central the *demos*, the better the political outcomes. On this point, Brennan observes: «this decline in political engagement is a

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth remarking that international comparisons reveal that political knowledge level of American electorate is, at worst, moderately below average (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996: 116-22; 89-92; Somin 2015: 10-11). In this sense, the data coming from the USA represent a reliable indicator for reflecting in normative terms about democratic citizenship's political ignorance. Nonetheless, chapter 2 also considers surveys on Italian citizens (see chapter 2, section 1).

good start, but we still have a long way to go. We should hope for even less participation, not more» (Brennan 2016: 3). From Brennan's point of view, the partial marginalization of several citizens is the safeness of democracy itself: «democracy works better than it otherwise would, because it doesn't exactly work. Democracy is supposed to give every individual citizen equal voice, but it doesn't» (Brennan 2016: 198). Generalizing Brennan's logic, the lesson from political ignorance is that democratic demos embodies paradoxically the Achilles' heel of democracy, as relying on citizens' involvement entails depending on their lack of information about political issues.

Brennan's critical view recalls a long tradition of skepticism towards democracy based on epistemic arguments, whose main figure was Plato. Comparing the destiny of the State with the navigation of the ship, Plato asserts: «a true captain must pay attention to the seasons of the year, the sky, the stars, the winds, and all that pertains to his craft if he is really going to be expert at ruling a ship» (Plato 2004: 182).<sup>2</sup> According to Plato, the helm of political power *must* be left in the hands of a capable helmsman: competent, rational and interested in playing such role. We will have the opportunity to consider more specifically the validity and the scope of this normative claim (see chapter 3, section 2). Here is just crucial to focus on the people as the pilot of democracy and figure out the way they steer the helm.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Besides the *Republic*, Plato outlines criticism towards democracy in *Gorgias* and *Laws* (Vegetti 2009: 20). However, it is worth noting that several tensions characterize platonic philosophy. For instance, in *Protagoras* a different view is defended by Socrates. «But when some matter of state policy comes up for consideration, anyone can get up and give his opinion, be he carpenter, smith or cobbler, merchant or ship-owner, rich or poor, noble or low-born, and no one objects to them as they did to those I mentioned just now, that they are trying to give advice about something which they never learnt, nor ever had any instruction in» (Plato 1991: 12).

<sup>3</sup> One might argue that people do not represent the pilot of democratic society, especially in contemporary regimes. Indeed, democratic decision-making process consists of a long chain of evaluations, analyzes, consultations, negotiations, votes, and vetoes. People are not the ultimate

Tellingly, Brennan recognizes different ways for denizens to be “little” political decision-makers – or, as Plato would have said, inadequate pilots.

### *Brennan’s Little Demos*

According to Brennan, there are three “species” of democratic citizens: hobbits, hooligans and Vulcans. His figurative description of democratic citizens has become quite popular among democratic theorists, as it captures with a cynical attitude how ordinary people engage with politics. Let’s consider the three categories one by one, starting from the hobbits.

Hobbits are mostly apathetic and ignorant about politics. They lack strong, fixed opinions about most political issues. Often they have no opinions at all. [...] They prefer to go on with their daily lives without giving politics much thought. In the United States, the typical nonvoter is a hobbit. (Brennan 2016: 4)

Hobbits-citizens have little or no knowledge about political scenario. As such, they ground their political convictions on misbelief or at least superficial understanding of the stakes. Even more, hobbits’ disinterest toward public affairs characterizes their political involvement which, consequently, can often take the shape of apathy toward political discussion and foster abstention in election days.

According to Brennan, this first category of “little” denizens represents the broadest sample of democratic population and, because of that, encourages to depict political ignorance as a constitutive trait of democratic electorates. Furthermore, the assumption that the standard citizen understands politics through the eyes of a hobbit is the perfect

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decision-maker on collective issues and, certainly, are the only one. Nevertheless, it is enough to acknowledge that popular suffrage undoubtedly constitutes the first link in the chain and has a decisive weight in the selection of decision-makers and determination of the political line. We will come back to centrality of the demos as political decision-makers in democratic framework in both chapter 3 and 4.

argument for supporting the thesis of “little demos” as a lucid description of democratic malaise. Basically, hobbits’ metaphor reveals political ignorance as lack or shortage of information to grasp the problems on the scene. Here ignorance is mostly synonym of “not knowing”, often associated with the awareness of not knowing. In fact, hobbits’ image characterizes not only the epistemic condition of citizens but also their unwillingness to get and digest political information. These citizens are ignorant and disinterested in understanding politics or, often, are ignorant because of their disinterest in understanding politics.

The second category of democratic citizens is that of “hooligans”.

Hooligans are the rabid sports fans of politics. They have strong and largely fixed worldviews. They can present arguments for their beliefs, but they cannot explain alternative points of view in a way that people with other views would find satisfactory. Hooligans consume political information, although in a biased way. [...] They tend to despise people who disagree with them, holding that people with alternative worldviews are stupid, evil, selfish, or at best, deeply misguided. Most regular voters, active political participants, activists, registered party members, and politicians are hooligans. (Brennan 2016: 5)

Differently from hobbits, hooligans are deeply involved in public debate and enjoy politics like Red Sox’s supporters enjoy baseball (Brennan 2014: 40). In this second case, the crucial aspect is citizens’ incapability to deal with politics in a balanced and detached way or, worse, their radical refusal to even hear the arguments from the other factions. Political hooligans are only interested in making their team more likely to win and, to this aim, transform their political preferences into the criteria to select information to corroborate their *Weltanschauung*. For instance, Martin and Yurukoglu highlighted that the choice of Fox News or MSNBC both reveals pre-existing political preferences and influences the formation of future political ideas. In 2008, a typical Democrat was 20 percentage points more likely to watch MSNBC, whereas a typical Republican was 30 points more likely to choose Fox News. At the same time, an hour of view per week of MSNBC decreased the likelihood of a Republican vote by about

3.6 percentage points. By contrast, watching Fox for an hour increased the probability of a Republican vote by 3.5 points (Martin and Yurukoglu 2014). In the hands of hooligans, media are not only the mean to promote their political message but also the instrument to renovate and reawaken their involvement in the cause.

This second kind of democratic denizen reveals that hobbits' political ignorance as simple lack of information represents only one piece of the puzzle, which also includes the reluctance to even hear the other side of the tale. In this sense, hooligan's political ignorance suggests more properly a form of irrationality in processing the data they acquire. Discussing Brennan theses, Talisse captures the traits of hobbits and hooligans as follows.

Democratic citizens are stunningly ignorant and irrational. They do not know – and often have false beliefs about – basic facts about the political order they inhabit (that's the ignorance), and they reliably embrace political policies on the basis of flawed rationales, shabby heuristics, and brute error (that's the irrationality). (Talisse 2018: 3)

So, under the label of “political ignorance” hide both disinformation (i.e., deficiencies in political knowledge) and misinformation (i.e., confidence in holding wrong beliefs). Obviously, these two phenomena are distinct in theory but tend to overlap and feed each other in reality. Analyses showed that misinformation acts as an obstacle to educating the public with correct facts (Kuklinski, Quirk, Jerit, Schwieder, Rich 2000). The deficiencies of hobbits and hooligans roughly capture the standard approach to politics adopted by democratic people. «Alas, many people fit the hobbit and hooligan molds quite well. Most Americans are either hobbits or hooligans, or fall somewhere in the spectrum in between» (Brennan 2016: 5). All in all, citizens within democratic societies are mostly hobbits, risking becoming hooligans when start taking care of politics: «participation stultifies people— that is, it tends to turn hobbits into hooligans [...] most hobbits are potential hooligans» (Brennan 2016: 6).

On this basis, Brennan presents democratic demos as a little demos, renitent to imbibe even minimal political notions and recalcitrant to face their prejudice in order to

critically assess the candidates and their proposals. Therefore, Brennan outlines the kind of consent given by the electorate as an “uninformed non-consent” (Brennan 2019) made by ignorance, irrationality, tribalism.

### *The Other Demos*

Alongside hobbits and hooligans, Brennan describes another category of citizens: the Vulcans. As the name intends to suggest by referring to the popular *Star Trek* saga, the American author includes in this category the virtuosos of political knowledge.

Vulcans think scientifically and rationally about politics. Their opinions are strongly grounded in social science and philosophy. They are self-aware, and only as confident as the evidence allows. Vulcans can explain contrary points of view in a way that people holding those views would find satisfactory. They are interested in politics, but at the same time, dispassionate, in part because they actively try to avoid being biased and irrational. They do not think everyone who disagrees with them is stupid, evil, or selfish. (Brennan 2016: 5).

Hobbits, hooligans and Vulcans are nothing but ideal types, abstract models used by Brennan to describe and problematize the different degrees of competence and involvement of the citizenry. However, the first two categories precisely depict people’s attitudes and, rather than ideal types, seemed to be metaphors and simplifications of existing and common proclivities. On the other hand, things seem different in the case of the Vulcans. In fact, the last Brennan’s democratic persona evokes a way of approaching politics that even experts and insiders hardly achieve – as the author admits. «No one manages to be a true Vulcan; everyone is at least a little biased» (Brennan 2016: 5). The description of Vulcans sets the bar too high to match the aptitude and the competence of the average citizen in dealing with politics. For this reason, Vulcans can not be the characterization of the average citizen informed and attentive to politics. Even more, Vulcans do not exemplify the level of political knowledge that citizens should strive to achieve. Indeed, such a demand would be

supererogatory and would represent an unrealistic moral duty for common citizens: *ad impossibilia nemo tenetur*.

Interestingly, the possibility of escaping from the littleness of hobbits and hooligans is considered by Brennan an unrealistic hypothesis or, in any case, reserved for *superior* individuals – as Vulcans are – in possession of moral, intellectual, and emotional abilities that are difficult to match. In this reading, only the *other* demos made by aces in political sciences can avoid political ignorance. However, this thesis of Brennan seems to overestimate the gap between political knowledge and political ignorance, neglecting the fact that political ignorance comes in degrees and that there are intermediate levels between little demos and axes. In general, Brennan's tripartition seems to characterize knowledge of politics as a form of excellence. This inevitably implies a long series of problems if applied to the people because, obviously, the standardization of excellence is a supererogatory expectation. For these reasons, it seems appropriate to hypothesize the existence of a fourth form of citizenship, the *other* demos, which is different from the hobbits and hooligans but also distinct from the formidable abilities of the Vulcans. As seen, Vulcans are the only citizens capable to escape political ignorance and irrationality but embodies individuals very informed, extremely rational, and perfectly objective in judging politics. However, citizens can also partially escape ignorance and irrationality without becoming Vulcans. For this reason, it seems reasonable to introduce another character in the democratic landscape: Muggles.

In *Harry Potter's* series, Muggles are people without magical ability. As such, they are incapable to transform animals into water goblets or to make objects fly by waving a stick as Hogwarts' students do. Nevertheless, Muggles can get many other things done even without magic. Muggles can fix objects, cure people, invent instruments, fight aggressors. Magic makes things easier, but Muggles can get brilliant results even without it. Returning to politics, Muggles citizens are not *magically* knowledgeable and rational as Vulcans are. Nevertheless, they tend to vote, and believe it is their duty to form sufficiently accurate ideas of what is at stake. To this aim, muggles watch the



news, read the newspapers, participate in political or quasi-political events (exhibitions, conferences, debates). As such, their opinions are not always grounded on social science and philosophy, but they often rely on remarks proposed by social scientists or comments expressed by experts. Despite this civic commitment, muggles are not focalized on politics: family, work and free time are for them much more important. Finally, this fourth category has prejudices and biases but does not end up thinking everyone who disagrees with them is stupid or evil. Muggles have their own worldview and a spontaneous sympathy for a certain political party. Nonetheless, they try to judge objectively the candidates, are willing to change their minds and, accordingly, to change the party/candidate they support.

As said, Brennan does not include Muggles (understood as epistemically committed citizens, even at a modest level) into his analysis of democratic demos. The addition of a fourth kind of citizen to Brennan's taxonomy is significant for reasons that we shall see in chapter 2, which attempts to set political ignorance in normative democratic theory. What is crucial here is to focus on Brennan's idea of democratic demos as little protagonist of political decision-making. The ship of the State, to recall Plato, is in wrong hands: this is the problem of democracy and the starting point of our investigation.

## **2. Sources of Political Ignorance**

### *Limits of Human Mind*

Political ignorance is the sign that democratic demos is *little*. As seen, Jason Brennan describes people's participation in politics as the disinformed and disinterested input of "hobbits" or the biased and partisan contribution of "hooligans". "Vulcans" are the rare exceptions to public ignorance and irrationality, so rare that they look more like a paradigmatic reference than a real kind of democratic person. Brennan's characterization of democratic demos echoes Plato's criticism towards democracy by

spotlighting people's deficiency as pilot of the State. In a like vein, epistocratic scholars such as Jason Brennan, Bryan Caplan, Ilya Somin, Claudio López-Guerra, Daniel Bell, and Garrett Jones assume the epistemic *littleness* of the demos and argue that the ignorance of the citizenry implies normative consequences and, in turn, requires institutional remedies.<sup>4</sup>

The epistemic littleness of democratic citizens could initially be investigated starting from the more general cognitive limitation of human beings. The irrationality and ignorance of citizens in acting as decision-makers would therefore represent only a nuance of the imperfection of the human mind. To put it briefly, individuals as human being has a proclivity to be ignorant of many issues (including politics) because they are not perfectly rational entities with an encyclopedic memory.

For instance, Miller showed how human minds have serious limitations in processing information. Indeed, we can hold only seven plus or minus two pieces of information in awareness at the same time (Miller 1957). Further, human attention is serial: when working memory imbibes new information, at the same time, it must displace old ones (Payne 1982).<sup>5</sup> All in all, human rationality gives its best when it works with little information and can consequently process a smaller amount of epistemic material.

We simply cannot hold all pieces of information relevant to a decision in working memory, weigh their value accurately, and consciously calculate the “correct” answer. Instead, humans seem to do the best they can with what they have cognitively available at the moment – to satisfice. (Valentino and Nardis 2013: 526).

Associating these analyzes with the great flow of information, arguments and subjects that characterize the political debate makes it clear that politics does not constitute the

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<sup>4</sup> The thesis of the “little demos” has been expounded through Brennan’s arguments which, as underlined, stands out for their clarity and rhetorical brilliance. The arguments carried on by these epistocratic authors will emerge in the investigation, together with the arguments they propose (see chapter 3, sections 1 and 2).

<sup>5</sup> Miller’s and Payne’s studies are illustrated and discussed by Taber and Young (2013: 526).

easiest object to know and assess. Even more, people without expertise in specific fields tend not to realize their lack of expertise and to acknowledge the obvious consequence that they are less likely to formulate accurate or even correct conclusions than skilled specialists. In psychology, this phenomenon is called “the Dunning-Kruger Effect,” named for David Dunning and Justin Kruger, the research psychologists who identified it in 1999. As Nichols observed, the lack of expertise in specific field is coupled with hardships in realizing not to have the necessary standing to figure out problems and formulate bright judgements. Simply put, failing to know about something may increase difficulties in grasping one’s degree of ignorance about that something. Nichols defines such epistemic short-circuit as the lack of “metacognition”.

[T]he more specific reason that unskilled or incompetent people overestimate their abilities far more than others is because they lack a key skill called “metacognition.” This is the ability to know when you’re not good at something by stepping back, looking at what you’re doing, and then realizing that you’re doing it wrong. (Nichols 2017: 45)

Such metacognition bias represents a significant factor to explore misinformation as confidence in holding wrong beliefs. Together with ignorance, vulnerability to false information is made possible by key features of human way to know and reflect.

All in all, the influence of considered cognitive and meta-cognitive mechanisms on people’s understanding of reality is persistent and, accordingly, such dynamics conditionate citizens’ comprehension of politics regardless of whether a democratic regime is in place. Denizens of a theocratic or aristocratic countries would still be characterized by the same cognitive deficits. The only variable would be that the distribution of political power in those systems would make negligible, if not completely irrelevant, the political ignorance of the mass as they are not involved in

political decision-making.<sup>6</sup> In this light, digging into the limits of human mind does not illuminate a hypothetical link between democracy and political ignorance.

Moreover, the awareness of the human limits in knowing and reflecting embodies an argument that the epistemic critics of democracy do not intend to ride and represents, in this sense, a marginal aspect in the analysis of political ignorance within democratic framework. This element can be explained by anticipating a central argument of chapter 2 which previous section already mentioned: ignorance and political knowledge comes in degrees. The political ignorance at stake represents a *grave* lack of knowledge and, consequently, the appeal to the constraints of the human mind is not necessary for explaining that ignorance. In fact, ignorance at issue can be cured by a *modest* enhancement, which is within human cognitive capacity. In this regard, imperfection of human mind is not the right perspective to examine Hobbits' and Hooligans' epistemic posture. Limits of human minds would constitute a salient element to consider in the case of spreading the kind of knowledge Vulcan possess. But it is not the case, as the description of Muggles attempted to demonstrate.

### *Pluralism and Extra Political Civic Virtue*

Consideration of epistemic weakness of citizens as human beings was necessary to exclude that political ignorance at issue simply represents a structural phenomenon of politics as human activity. Present section starts taking into account other factors, which are not related to human mind, but rather, raise from distinctive traits of democratic environment. Particularly, the analysis wonders whether low degree of political information is fostered by two features of contemporary democratic societies: pluralism and mass participation. In this light, political ignorance would turn out to be

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<sup>6</sup> Surely, the fact that the human mind suffers from epistemic limitations could constitute a strong argument against the concentration of power in the hands of few subjects typical of aristocracy or theocracy. In fact, autocrats and elite have the same intellectual constraints which can even more difficulty emerge if their domination encounters no or few criticisms.

an inevitable weak spot of democratic process, and little demos emerges as a consequent backlash of democracy itself, originated or fueled by democracy's axiological and procedural arrangement.

Pluralism on the one hand and mass voting on the other, are not congenital traits of human political experience. Rather, both these phenomena are consequences of embracing and adopting universal suffrage liberal democracy (Bobbio 1987, Holmes 1995, Przeworski 2018), that is, the kind political paradigm which has fallen sick with political ignorance. Recognizing a connection between these two characteristics of democracy and political ignorance of the electorate would raise the doubt that the link might also configure a permanent connection. So understood, political ignorance would turn out to be an inborn flaw of democratic decision-making by representing a theoretical cost connected to the choice of pluralism and universal suffrage.

Let's firstly focus on pluralism. By pluralism is meant the recognition and protection of different interests, worldviews, and lifestyle within the political community. As a consequence, individuals have competing and perhaps even irreconcilable conceptions of good and wrong, of justice and happiness (Berlin 1969; Rawls 1993; Galston 2000). Pluralistic societies encompass several possible declinations of civic virtue, that is, the ways citizens are allowed and expected to serve the common good. In the spirit of pluralism, different civic virtues betray the existence of different experiences, inclinations, and ideals within democratic society.

On this point, an interpretation advocated by Jason Brennan links civic virtue to the problem of political ignorance. As a matter of fact, argues Brennan, citizens might decide to achieve civic virtue and contribute to the common good without engaging with politics.<sup>7</sup> This interpretation overcomes the republican view of civic virtue as based on political commitment and, on the contrary, understands disinterest towards politics and public affairs as excusable and even reasonable attitudes. Looking back at the models of democratic citizens, such reading of civic virtue perfectly dovetails with

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<sup>7</sup> Referring to the literature on civic virtues, Brennan argues that civic virtue is about the disposition to promote the common good of the community to which one belongs (Brennan 2012: 315-6).

hobbits' way of life and convincingly justifies their inclination to live and return something back to society without being committed in political activity of any sort. Brennan defines this attempt to serve the common good as “extrapolitical conception of civic virtue” and expressively emphasizes that lack of political or public commitment does not jeopardize the possibility of working for the common good.

I defend the extrapolitical conception of civic virtue. According to the extrapolitical conception, political participation is not necessary for the exercise of civic virtue. [...] In liberal societies, there are many ways to be a good citizen. Some of these ways are the stereotypical republican ones: voting well, campaigning, pushing for institutional improvements, or engaging in national, military, or political service. But many activities stereotypically considered private, such as being a conscientious employee, making art, running a for-profit business, or pursuing scientific discoveries, can also be exercises of civic virtue (Brennan 2011: 44).

The role of for-profit activities is central in Brennan's interpretation of civic virtue. Social scientist and economists, Brennan observes, agree that free market is a powerful instrument for building up wealth societies. In this respect for-profit businesses play a pivotal part, since they «sustain, and improve conditions of wealth and opportunity, under which people become better able to realize their conceptions of the good life» (Brennan 2012: 314). By managing for-profit businesses with competence, initiative, and dedication, it is possible to create jobs, spread wealth, accelerate progress. By being successful, for-profit businessmen give back a lot to their community and help create material conditions that allow others to live decently according to the ideal of justice they prefer. «If any of us has the goal of serving the common good, one good strategy for satisfying that goal would be to work for the market economy. [...] When we go to work in business, we help create, sustain, and improve these networks of mutual benefit» (Brennan 2012: 319). On this basis, Brennan formulates an extrapolitical version of civic virtue, grounded on the evidence that capable citizens working for market economy can make profit and, at the same time, enrich the society to which they belong.

For-profit business as civic virtue: A person can exercise civic virtue by working for or running a for-profit business, provided she has the right motivations when she works, and provided her activities do tend sufficiently to promote the common good. In principle, for-profit business activity is just as good a way to exercise civic virtue as political activity. (Brennan 2012: 314)

For-profit business as civic virtue puts citizens in the position to see their indifference (and little knowledge) towards politics as obvious backlash of nonetheless civically virtuous conduct. In fact, working for the public economics takes time and energies: citizens who choose to contribute to the common good in this way can legitimately justify the lack of political competence which, in turn, requires time and energies.

As mentioned above, this conception of civic virtue tailors the lifestyle of the hobbits. Hobbits' disinterest in politics might easily lead them to embrace for-profit conception of civic virtue. However, to be civic virtuous as hobbits, it is not enough to contribute to the common good by just *preferring* the market to politics. Following Brennan, a further step is required: that is, to transform disinterest in politics into a systematic commitment not to be tempted by the call of polls. In a nutshell, abstention from voting represents a decisive component of hobbits' civic virtue. In fact, as Brennan acknowledges, civic virtue (as other virtues) has a motivational component: one has not only to serve common good, but desire to do that (Brennan 2012: 320). Hobbits must *want* the good of the community and, consequently, contribute to it through their own private activities and, at the same time, not jeopardize its achievement by polluting the polls with their political apathy and misinformation. The path of extra political conception of civic virtue has indeed the obvious implication to let other citizens to advance common good through an "enlightened" political participation. Brennan summarizes these requirements in his formulation of an ethics of voting.

1. Citizens have no civic or moral obligation to vote.
2. Citizens can pay their debts to society and exercise civic virtue without being involved in politics.

3. People who lack certain credentials (such as knowledge, rationality, and intellectual virtue) should abstain from voting. (Brennan 2011: 12-3).

Since extra political civic virtue includes abstention as a normative pillar in hobbits' political participation, one might wonder how hobbit can endanger democracy by "polluting the polls" if they abstain on election day. The answer is that abstention does not exhaust the possible ways hobbits might embody the for-profit business virtue. Hobbits can still decide to vote based on a reasonable motivation, without for this extending their political knowledge.<sup>8</sup> As Brennan himself recognized, citizens might for instance listen to a trusted person and decide to vote following indications received (Brennan 2011: 76). They would still lack political knowledge and act based not on awareness of the stakes, but rather on trustworthiness (Moraro 2017). In this scenario, hobbits might glean political information from their business activity to vote for a "friendly" candidate, maybe following the indications coming from associations or lobbies. Oilmen would vote for pro-oil candidates, sellers of wind turbines vote for environmentalist candidate, firearms manufacturer vote for candidates against gun control, and so on.

Democracy as liberal and pluralistic political system ends up harboring a conception of civic virtue which tolerates and justifies political ignorance. In this light, democracy would have the congenital tendency to "produce" politically ignorant and unaware citizens, who keep at a distance from political knowledge without for this renouncing to see their privatism and neglect of public affairs as sincere contribution to the common good.

### *Contemporary Democracy as a Mass Phenomenon*

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<sup>8</sup> This possibility is stressed by Somin. «The point is that even an ignorant voter who did rationally evaluate his limited stock of information might still conclude that one party is superior to the other and cast his ballot accordingly» (Somin 2013: 87).



Although there are countless possible definitions of democracy, some elements recur and allow us to frame an important aspect to better define the endogenous link between democracy and political ignorance. One of these recurring elements, rather obvious, is that democracy embodies a mass phenomenon. Becker, for instance, describes democracy as a «an institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals endeavor to acquire political office through perfectly free competition for the votes of a *broadly based electorate*» (Becker 1958: 106). Similarly, Bobbio understands democracy as the political system which enfranchises all the adult citizens and assigns political power according to their expressed preferences (Bobbio 1987: 69). Becker focuses on the kind of “largeness” characterizes the suffrage. «Although “large” is a matter of degree, it is clear that countries have differed greatly; for example, 17th century England had much too narrow a franchise to qualify as a political democracy» (Becker 1958: 106). Regardless of the precise threshold of people enfranchisement, democratic framework is defined by the massive inclusion of citizens into political decision-making. Those authors concentrate on the right to vote as the principal means for political inclusion; however, other democratic rights enable citizens to act as political-decision makers and allow them to express their say about public choices. Right of association, freedom of speech and press, freedom of assembly, and the right to strike are other powerful ways through which people’s agency is recognized and included in democratic process (see chapter 4, section 2). The obvious implication of universal political inclusion is the fact that democracy is a mass phenomenon. Elections, for instance, mobilize many people and the presence of a vast number of ballots is the natural consequence of the rule of the people democracy intends to achieve. Democracy as a mass phenomenon represents a second possible trait, together with pluralism, to explain political ignorance of democratic people. Several authors reflect on demos’ epistemic littleness by focusing on individual behavior in a context of massive participation and, in case of the right to vote, high turnout. As a mass activity, voting implies the inevitable devaluation of individual contribution. Adopting Dworkin’s terminology, in elections individuals have little

weight in determining the outcome either by the impact of their preferences or by the influence of their participation (Dworkin 2000: 191-4). Discussing voting and individual commitment in politics, Brennan focuses on these two different aspects. Concerning the impact, Brennan observes that even if ordinary citizens invested time and energy to vote as a “Vulcan” would, their vote would be lost in the immense mass of ballots collected at the polls. To recall Brennan’s words: «democracy does not empower you as an individual» (Brennan 2016: 78).

I have approximately 1/210,000,000 of the legal voting power in the United States. I have actively opposed my country’s military endeavors for the last ten years. It is not as though by voting against hawkish candidates, I reduced US bellicosity by 1/210,000,000th. I have stopped not a single bullet from being fired. I have had no effect whatsoever. [...] My political activities have had no effect whatsoever on law or policy, and most likely, they never will. And unless you are in a better position, the same goes for you. (Brennan 2016: 110).

Then there is a second aspect, which concerns political influence. Even if the individuals may not change the course of events through their single vote, they could nevertheless rely on their own convictions and persuasiveness to create a wave in public opinion capable of influencing the results in one way or another. People can resort to right of association, freedom of speech and press, freedom of assembly, and the right to strike to persuade many other citizens that the candidate X is the best presidential candidate or that policy Y is a disaster for the country. Again, big numbers complicate this view. Despite this remains a possible scenario in theory, one might claim that rarely single citizens have the right credentials to conditionate their fellows’ political positions at the polls. As Brennan noted, few opinion leaders are capable of significantly shaking public opinion. «Some activists, such as Martin Luther King Jr., have had enormous influence. But most don’t» (Brennan 2016: 87). The evocation of MLK gives the idea of talent and cost of being a leader for the public opinion in the context of democracy as a mass phenomenon. Commitment alone is not enough: «most of us could not come to acquire that much influence even if we tried, just as most of us

could not become professional baseball players or pop stars no matter how hard we try» (Brennan 2016: 87).

All in all, the limited weight of the individual participant in both impact and influence follows as an immediate consequence of democracy as a system based on mass participation. Critics of political ignorance move from this to stress the limited weight of individuals in political decisions. «Large groups of people certainly can have power in democracies. [...] But individuals normally do not. Indeed, that's a feature, not a bug, of democracy» (Brennan 2016: 88). In the case of voting, several studies have indeed systematized the tiny possibility for a single vote to be decisive in a mass election.<sup>9</sup> Admittedly, proportional electoral systems tend to give more weight to the individual vote since the probability for a specific candidate or party to win the elections alone is lower and that the formation of the government depends on the strength of the mandate that the voters confer through the number of their preferences. Guerrero, for instance, argues that «each of us, each individual voter (and non-voter), does make a difference through our voting behavior to this feature of the electoral outcome: the strength of the elected representative's manifest normative mandate» (Guerrero 2010: 275).<sup>10</sup> Put in this way, the calculation of the threshold for casting the decisive or at least a useful vote become harder. Electors might see the cost of voting mitigated by the hope to give the party/candidate they support a stronger mandate, even

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<sup>9</sup> On the probability for a voter to be decisive see, among others, Good and Mayer (1975), Chamberlain and Rothchild (1981), Gelman, Katz, and Bafumi (2004). Referring to the elections in the United States, the probability that the ballot casted in the poll is decisive is almost infinitesimal, as an analysis of 2008 presidential election estimated. «In summary, we estimate the probability of a single vote being decisive as, at most, about 1 in 10 million in a few states near the national median. Averaging these probabilities over all the states and weighting by turnout yields a 1 in 60 million chance that a randomly selected voter would be decisive» (Gelman, Silver, Edlin 2012: 323-4).

<sup>10</sup> In his analysis, Guerrero does not mention proportional systems as the precondition for making a difference in terms of manifest normative mandate. Nevertheless, the relation between proportional system and Guerrero's view can be easily justified given the way proportional voting systems allow even little parties to win a place at the table.

if it is not the most voted one. Brennan replies to Guerrero's interpretation by remarking the existence of a certain threshold for a vote to be decisive, if not for winning elections, to gain a manifest normative mandate. «If he thinks there is some threshold number or percentage of votes at which a representative's normative authority changes, then, as with breaking a tie, the probability that an individual vote will decisively pass that threshold is vanishingly small» (Brennan 2016: 249).

In any case, leaving aside the kind of voting system and the achievement of a strong mandate, what is crucial is the evidence that mass voting provides no incentive to acquire political information prior to election day in order to produce an effect on elections' results. In fact, given the exiguous weight of individuals in terms of both impact and influence, citizens are not encouraged to rely political participation as effective way to orient political decision-making.<sup>11</sup> The combination of inconsistent weight of individual contribution and the relative easiness to realize it constitute the premises for the phenomena of ratiom ignorance and rational irrationality.<sup>12</sup>

### *Rational Ignorance and Rational Irrationality*

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<sup>11</sup> Voting can be disconnected by its instrumental value in determining the outcome of the election. For instance, Achen and Bartels (2016) argue that voting should be understood as the individual affirmation to belong to a specific social group. Relevant here is the fact that mass voting triggers considerations and behaviors which, in turn, lead to political ignorance.

<sup>12</sup> Somin emphasizes that the marginal weight of single vote is intuited by electors without engaging complicated calculation. «As with the decision to vote itself, we need not assume that individual voters make a detailed and precise calculation about the costs and benefits of information acquisition. They probably instead simply have an intuitive sense that there is little or no benefit to making a major effort to increase their knowledge about politics. Most people similarly assume without precise calculation that there is little benefit to acquiring information about such subjects as theoretical physics or cell biology, though these bodies of knowledge also have great value to society as a whole» (Somin 2006: 260).

Obvious repercussions of mass participation occur even in citizens' disposition to acquire political information. Attention to the behavior of single participant is rooted in the economic theory of democracy and leads to the concepts of rational ignorance and rational irrationality. Particularly, Anthony Downs pioneered a systematic focus to such problem in his *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. The presence of many other voters, Downs underlines, lowers the incidence of individual preferences and triggers assessments on the costs and benefits associated with voting and, even before, the acquisition of information before voting.

[E]very rational voter realizes that he is not the only person voting. This knowledge radically alters his view of the importance of his own vote. If he is the only voter, the cost to him of voting incorrectly is measured by his party differential, because an incorrect vote elects the wrong party. But in fact there are multitudes of other voters. Therefore the party which eventually wins will probably be elected no matter how he casts his ballot, as long as the other citizens vote independently of him. (Downs 1957: 244).

Electoral results do not depend on individual voter's preferences and electors easily realize it. Whether one votes or not, the outcome will not change. Consequently, citizens are encouraged to wonder whether it is worth investing time and energy to understand the stakes and single out the best option at the polls. For many electors the answer is negative: «it is rational for a great part of the electorate to minimize investment in political data» (Downs 1957: 245). Citizens avoid acquiring information on the issues at stake and tend to vote since voting per se is a low-cost activity. Hence, voting is accompanied and supported by previous beliefs, developed without further reflections or investigations (Aldrich 1993). As Downs remarked: «rational behavior implies both a refusal to expend resources on political information per se and a definite limitation of the amount of free political information absorbed» (Downs 1957: 245).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Recalling Dworkin's terminology, the reported passages from Anthony Downs focuses on "impact". Nevertheless, he also considers the "influence" of individual voters, emphasizing the costs

Somin defends and develops the theory of rational political ignorance by stressing that the absence of incentives also keeps altruistic and civic voters from being informed in view of the vote. Indeed, despite the inclination to act for the good of others over their own whenever the two conflict, would hardly devote many efforts for the sake of casting an informed vote, if that vote does not change things. «No matter how great the benefits to others of a “correct” electoral outcome, the altruist’s ballot has almost no chance of bringing it about; in a large electorate the chance that his vote will be decisive is vanishingly small» (Somin 2013: 65). In this light, the awareness that the single ballot has almost no chance to determine an election or at least to put in the hands of candidates a “manifest normative mandate” has repercussions not only on electors’ ignorance but also on people’s willingness to process political information, namely, their rationality. Here again, mass participation as a constitutive feature of the democratic framework sets the stage for deforming citizens’ attitude to act as epistemic agent. Particularly, the absence of incentives fosters citizens to make room for their prejudices and preexisting fondness. In this sense, voting as a low-benefit activity in terms of electoral weight, is transformed into a source of emotional satisfaction for individuals, a way to express one’s own convictions. Obviously, voting can become the mean to this kind of emotional delight if citizens do not forego any detailed analysis of political scenario. So, together with little value of electoral weight, sidestepping any sort of political information and reflection represent the second requisite to enjoy an emotional satisfaction through irrationality in voting. Irrationality can become an instrument for emotional gratification if it is rationally cultivated, that is, little value of voting is realized, and political information are avoided. Overall, democracy as mass phenomenon houses – together with rational ignorance – also rational irrationality.

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common citizens must face to conditionate the government. «The amount of this cost of communication depends upon the position of the citizen in society. If he happens to be Vice-President of the United States, it will be low; if he is a laborer in a mining town, it may be very high». (Downs 1957: 252).

Bryan Caplan has drawn the attention on the notion of political irrationality by emphasizing its salience on citizens' approaching to vote and sketching the contours of such phenomenon. With Caplan's words, the "institutional structure of democracy" moves citizens away from a practical approach to political participation as the voter «has no practical efficacy to give up in first place» (Caplan 2007: 132). Caplan argues that this is the foreseeable voters' reaction to the lack of incentives. Since casting a disinformed ballot has no direct consequence on voter life it is worth for electors living consistently with their own convictions and enjoying the satisfaction this entails. As Caplan remarks by referring to Arthur Koestler acute comment, deconversion from previous beliefs along the way to the truth is a «emotional harakiri» (Caplan 2007: 118). Mass participation and, particularly, mass voting as path to political ignorance and irrationality provide a second viewpoint over the connection between democracy and political ignorance. The study of little demos and its normative consequences for democratic paradigm must necessarily deal with this connection and taking into consideration the challenging perspective that democratic demos is fatefully encouraged to littleness by intrinsic features of democracy itself.

### **3. Political Ignorance and Mass Intelligence**

#### *Epistemic Reliability of the Mass*

Even if we take for granted individuals' political ignorance, a general objection should be considered in the analysis of political ignorance within democratic paradigm. Individuals might be biased and disinformed about politics, nevertheless, the inputs from the public under democratic regimes do depend on the aggregation of many voices. Shifting the focus from the individual to the many, one might observe that the mass as a whole is still capable to produce good outcomes or, at least, to outperform the median participant in terms of accuracy to answer public issues. To simplify, it would turn out that the choir altogether can sing enjoyable melody, even though

individual choristers are not so tuned. Furthermore, the epistemic capacities of large groups could, under specific conditions, defeat those of smaller groups of competent decision makers. In this light, deliberation and aggregation could embody a key argument for presenting democratic decision-making as a more precise system than forms of oligarchy based on the high competence of the ruling class. According to this different perspective, political knowledge or ignorance should be investigated and assessed as aggregation, rejecting as marginal or insignificant the critique based on single citizens poor knowledge of politics. What would count for democratic theory is the intelligence of the multitude and not the mistakes and misbeliefs observed at individual level.

The argument of “mass intelligence” was firstly proposed by Aristotle.<sup>14</sup>

For the many, who are not as individuals excellent men, nevertheless can, when they have come together, be better than the few best people, not individually but collectively, just as feasts to which many contribute are better than feasts provided at one person’s expense. For being many, each of them can have some part of virtue and practical wisdom, and when they come together, the multitude is just like a single human being, with many feet, hands, and senses, and so too for their character traits and wisdom. That is why the many are better judges of works of music and of the poets. (Aristotle 1998: 83).

The Stagirite expressed the intuition that coming together to decide entails by itself positive effects. Individual limitations are cured or at least stemmed by aggregation of many heads, most virtuous participants contaminate the others, their competence spills over into the procedure and everyone can refine the outcome with a personal

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<sup>14</sup> This epistemic phenomenon, connected to the aggregation of individual judgements, has been called in different ways in philosophical thought: “mass intelligence”, “wisdom of the crowds”, “wisdom of the multitude”, “democratic reason”. The basic gist that the many are more accurate than individuals or little groups of competent reasoners, has been developed and defended in different ways, starting from different assumptions – as we shall see.



contribution (which can grasp aspects that elite alone are not able get). From the intuition expressed by the Stagirite, three theories have been formulated to explain and justify the positive correlation between judgements formulated by many participants and the accuracy of the judgements themselves.

*Miracle of aggregation theorem.* If errors in large groups are randomly distributed, then as long as there is a minority of well-informed voters, the group made up almost entirely of ignorant participants will perform just as well in epistemic terms as a group made up entirely of informed participants.

*Condorcet's jury theorem.* If participants are independent, and if the average participant is sufficiently well motivated and more likely than not to be correct (i.e., the probability of getting the right answer is greater than 0,5), then as a group becomes larger and larger, the probability the group will get the right answer approaches 1.<sup>15</sup>

*Hong-Page theorem.* Under the right conditions, cognitive diversity among the participants in a collective decision-making process better contributes to that process producing right outcomes than increasing the participants' individual reliability or ability.<sup>16</sup>

Forcefully, the theorems outline a strong argument to reduce the reach and the urgency of citizens' political ignorance within democratic framework. Aggregation alone can prevent demos from choosing the wrong option and ensure a wise process of evaluation and decision-making. Why to improve the ability of single citizens if the people altogether can provide good, or at least better outcomes than individual would do? Why worry about the level of the musicians if the choir can already sing catchy music? Of course, it is a safe guess that improving the level of single citizens – or musicians – would inevitably raise the quality of the outcome produced by the group. For instance, in the “miracle of aggregation”, the increase of competent members of the group would reduce the random votes. As a consequence, the subset of people choosing the options based on solid reason would grow up and, contextually, the probability of the group to

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<sup>15</sup> See Condorcet (1986).

<sup>16</sup> See Hong and Page (2001, 2004, 2009).

get the right answer would increase. On the other hand, the aggregation of preferences in Condorcet jury theorem provides better results as the accuracy of average participant increases (List 2012). Tellingly, individual knowledge remains a precious virtue, able to enrich the judgment of the individuals as well of the mass. Nevertheless, aiming for better results is substantially different from lamenting insufficient outcomes. On balance, mass intelligence might lead to downsize the problem of “little demos” by stressing the benefits of many heads judging together.

### *Systematic Distribution of Preferences and Miracle of Aggregation*

Critics who understand political ignorance as a deep threat for democracy advocate a different interpretation of the relationship between the contribution of individuals and the wisdom of the crowd. In their view, biases caused by ignorance are not randomly but systematically distributed. Accordingly, aggregation cannot have the positive effects hoped by Aristotle and its outcomes are conditioned by the effect of participant’s starting ignorance.

The systematic distribution of errors makes a first decisive point, particularly relevant in addressing the miracle of aggregation. Caplan and Althaus stress the existence of a strong correlation, empirically evident, between political knowledge and political ideas. Lack of knowledge in fields relevant for political decision-making coupled with inductive observations of social phenomena exacerbates precise biases and prejudices. Caplan dwells on preferences of the public in field of economics, remarking that on average ordinary citizens tend to underestimate the economic benefits of the market mechanism (antimarket bias), interaction with foreigners (antiforeign bias), conserving labor (make-work bias) and, besides that, to endorse a worried perspective over the present and future performance of the economy (pessimistic bias) (Caplan 2007: 30-48). More specifically, looking at the empirical research conducted by Althaus, Caplan observes that political misinformation is associated with specific positions which, in turn, are structurally distant from the point of view of the informed public and experts.

First, the public fail to know reliable (and relevant) data to take a stand on public issues, ending up feeding their view with false depiction of political circumstances.<sup>17</sup> Second, the average preference of the public diverges from the opinions upheld by the people with high “political IQ” (i.e., a high knowledge about basic political notion).<sup>18</sup> On this point, Althaus argues, it is possible to track the preferences that an informed citizenship would support. Such a public would advocate the principle of affirmative action, pro-choice in case of abortion, progressive legislation on immigration and gay rights, intervention in foreign affairs, dovish approach when military is involved, cut of domestic programs and payment of higher taxes to reduce government budget deficit (Althaus 2003: 143). Third, people political ignorance might be investigated and scrutinized adopting the perspective of the experts. Again, electors develop systematic biases which are not randomly but structurally different from the competent view of the experts. This thesis is well reconstructed in empirical literature.

The *prima facie* evidence of voter bias is strong. Political scientists and the public systematically disagree on 15 out of 16 questions.<sup>19</sup> Their belief gaps are usually large in magnitude and highly statistically significant. After adding controls for self-serving bias, ideological bias, and education to the list of control variables, more than 90% of the raw belief gap between political scientists and the public remains. (Caplan, Crampton, Grove, and Somin 2013: 766).

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<sup>17</sup> For instance, American electorate overestimates the foreign aid budget by more than 20 times (Caplan 2009: 201).

<sup>18</sup> Political IQ refers to the knowledge about rudimentary notions of institutional design, such as the length of a presidential term, the number of senators each state has, and so on. The implicit reference is toward US constitution.

<sup>19</sup> The passage refers to a series of questions about education, economics, Iraq war and the crime rate. The purpose of the investigation was to establish the capacity of voters to attribute responsibility for results obtained in the various subjects listed by perceiving the political influence on policy outcomes.

The systematic formation of biases in relation to the political knowledge possessed by citizenship represents a serious obstacle for the miracle of aggregation. As shown, political ignorance does not result in casual preferences fortuitously distributed – as the theorem presupposes. Rather, a low level of political knowledge corresponds to positions that are far from the median position of well-informed participants. Caplan makes this point very clearly by considering the aggregation of votes in hypothetical group and stressing that average participants do not reproduce the “fair coin error” but conflate into mistaken positions. In this regard, it is reasonable to assume that the preferences of uninformed participants do not scatter randomly, but converge on a precise choice, which reflects their bias. Consequently, the percentage of participants who vote in an informed manner may not be enough to overturn the flow of preferences created by those with little information. In this light, Caplan concludes that «to the extent that the random error assumption of the Miracle of Aggregation fails, majority rule falls short of this optimum» (Caplan 2009: 200). Systematic distribution of preferences in relation to one’s political information represents a first important argument to raise criticisms about the success of aggregation and the benefits of mass intelligence. Moreover, it embodies a rationale to realize the salience of political ignorance in democratic decision-making.

### *Three Hardships in Condorcet Jury Theorem*

Observations made about the distribution of political information among the public foster criticism about the fruitfulness of Condorcet jury theorem under the factual conditions of democratic public. Particularly, skepticism sticks to the expected growth in group accuracy as it is rooted in participants’ likelihood of supporting the right option. As seen, Condorcet jury theorem assumes that members of the group have a competence higher than 0.5 (i.e., more than 50% of probability to guess the best alternative). Such precondition grounds the overall effectiveness of the theorem in real democracies, where epistocrats raise serious doubts about the actual capability of

citizens to make the best choice. Brennan wonders whether Condorcet jury theorem would bear the brunt of the real electorate and produce the ideal outcomes foreseen in ideal circumstances: «if they are systematically mistaken, then their mean competence is less than 0.5, so Condorcet's Jury Theorem condemns rather than defends democracy» (Brennan 2014: 36).

Besides the problem of mean level of competence, critics concentrate on a second problem. Real electorates do not accomplish a further condition of Condorcet's theorem: that of independence. Democracies protect the free flow of information and ideas between citizens and their peers, citizens and leaders (Estlund 1994).<sup>20</sup> People can affect each other, instilling in their fellow citizens sympathy for a certain leader, party, policy or political philosophy. Influencers might be both competent and disinformed individuals. On this point, Caplan insists that the level of political knowledge spread among citizens is low and, thus, their interdependence might end up disseminating biases and misbeliefs, thus jamming the mechanism of Condorcet jury theorem (Caplan 2012: 329).

Third, Condorcet jury theorem did not focus on the formation of ideas among which people are called to choose from. The theory just focuses on reliability in selecting the best among two options. Democracy is more complicated, and people are not juries summoned to determine the outcome starting from two predetermined options (as in case of jury trials: guilty or not). Rather, democratic demos actively contribute to identifying possible options to choose from in the elections. In this sense, the success in binary choices, does not shed light on the correctness of such options. The public might select the best options on the table, without upholding something correct.

But where do the two leading choices come from? They are in large part a function of the public's level of understanding. Suppose that two candidates compete in terms of their

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<sup>20</sup> Estlund (1994) argues that individuals might remain independent even if they decide to endorse someone else view. Leaving aside this point, what is certain is that independence as the development of certain positions exclusively based on one's experiences rarely happens in real democracies.

competence and their position on trade. If the majority is protectionist, both candidates will endogenously embrace protectionism in order to win. As a result, the public will have a “big choice” between two protectionist candidates. (Caplan 2012: 329)

Again, aggregation alone and collective intelligence mechanisms may not be enough to neutralize the influence of individual political ignorance.

### *Hong-Page Theorem and Starting Knowledge*

Doubts about the beneficial effects of aggregation can be raised also in the case of Hong-Page theorem. As mentioned, the theorem underscores the epistemic benefits descending from the diversity within the group of decision-makers.<sup>21</sup> This recalls the Aristotle’s faith in the high number of views gathered by the mass, in the consequent opportunity to hear the other side before taking a stand and, thus, in refining the seek for truth trough collective deliberation.<sup>22</sup> Strenuous defender of this theorem is Landemore, who relies on the Hong-Page theorem to underline the epistemic advantages deriving from the diversity of points of view that deliberation aggregates. According to Landemore, democracy should recognize the potential of the demos in solving political problems and avoid increasing the political knowledge of individuals if this implies a decrease in cognitive diversity as a backlash (Landemore 2012a: 6). In this view, diversity, not knowledge, is the key for effective deliberation. Moreover, in

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<sup>21</sup> Diversity in perspectives (the way of representing situations and problems), diversity of interpretations (the way of categorizing or partitioning perspectives), diversity of heuristics (the way of generating solutions to problems), and diversity of predictive models (the way of inferring cause and effect) (Page 2007: 7).

<sup>22</sup> Waldron emphasizes this aspect by discussing book 3, chapter 11 of Aristotle’s *Politics*. «Maybe what happens when the many come together to make a decision is that they find out from each other how each person’s well-being may be affected by the matter under consideration. [...] A merchant may not realize how much some measure he is initially inclined to support may prejudice the situation of a farmer until he hears it from the farmer’s own mouth» (Waldron 1998: 568).

Landemore's view, political ignorance of citizens alone does not jeopardize the epistemic reliability of democratic process, in that the intelligence of the mass relieves the pressure on citizens role. Such marginality of individual in relation to the centrality of the society overall constitutes the core of Landemore's idea of "democratic reason". For Landemore, democracy as an institutional decision-making technique is based on the intelligence of the mass and, consequently, one should not focus on the role of the individual to assess the quality of the deliberative and decision-making process. With Landemore's words, «individual citizens cognitively unburden themselves by letting others, as well as the environment, process parts of the social calculus» (Landemore 2012b: 255). Landemore's concept of democratic reason answers to those «political scientists worried that individual citizens lack the capacity for self-rule» arguing that «what matters is not just what individuals can do on their own, but what they can do with the help of political cognitive artifacts such as inclusive deliberation and majority rule» (Landemore 2012b: 255).

Obviously, Landemore's confidence in the inclusive deliberation takes for granted a minimal level of deliberators' knowledge and rationality. Indeed, the author admits that her argument is theoretical and a priori rather than empirical (Landemore 2013: 9). As such, to defend her conclusions, Landemore assumes that minimal cognitive requirements are met and questions Caplan's characterization of people's ignorance: «Caplan's worst-case scenario of a situation in which the average error is high and diversity low – the condition for the worst-case scenario of an abysmally unintelligent majority decision – is not very plausible» (Landemore 2012b: 273). Landemore's remark is crucial to figure out the pivotal part played by effective knowledge and real ideas circulating among the people for the functioning of Hong-Page theorem. Recalling previous remarks about origins of the options among to choose from, one might wonder whether diversity theorem considers the realistic condition of democratic people, their difficulties to understand even basic data of social sciences, the rules of democratic practice and the positions of the candidates/parties. People-jurors must possess informed positions on which rely to feed the collective deliberation on public

issues.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, deliberations and aggregation alone, specifically if crucial information lacks, might not ensure the triumph of enlightened positions, specifically under epistemic circumstances proper of democratic public.<sup>24</sup> Anchoring his observations to social science and insisting on the relevance of this discipline for political deliberation, Gunn clearly emphasizes the need for knowledge within groups to make wise political choices possible and probable.

To achieve either full information or more complete information, the deliberators still need to have true, relevant knowledge in their collective possession – no matter how fragmentary it is or mixed up with bad arguments – which can be elicited by deliberation. One cannot get something out of nothing. [...] Like argumentative reasoning, but on a bigger scale, we have no reason to think that the aggregation of voters’ judgments about how to navigate the maze of modern society provides knowledge. Instead, by combining the parcels of information that lead to voters’ judgments and effectively weighting them according to their occurrence in the population, aggregation acts simply to sift voter opinions so that resulting decisions reflect collective judgments of “common sense” that may or may not turn out to be accurate. (Gunn 2014: 74)

Diversity, to summarize Gunn’s concern, cannot certify the presence of well-founded views over the public sphere and its problems. Radicalization of pre-existing positions or unproductive contrapositions of prejudices would be the outcome of putting many voices together, if the assembly did not possess political knowledge. More emphatically, Brennan harshly criticizes the lack of empirical evidence in support of Landemore’s assumption over the wisdom of the crowds and, thus, the factual reliability of “democratic reason” paradigm. In Brennan’s view, Landemore’s defense of Hong-Page’s theorem suffers a weak, that is, the author addresses empirical criticism

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<sup>23</sup> Landemore compares democratic deliberation to the one involving a jury. In particular, Landemore describes as illuminating the plot of courtroom drama film *12 Angry Men* (Landemore 2012a: 3, 2012b: 257, 2013: 95).

<sup>24</sup> On this point, see the previous analysis of “rational irrationality”.



with theoretical assumptions. Differently from Page himself, who admits that the theorem works in precise ideal conditions, Landemore tracks encouraging conclusions and positive implications of the theorem in real democracy (Brennan 2014: 37-9). A similar approach embodies, according to Brennan, an escape rope from discussion about the tangible existence of little demos and from the consequent challenge it poses to democratic theory.

Like many democratic theorists, Landemore's response to empirical critiques of democratic behavior is to retreat to ideal theory. She says that real-life democracies aren't sufficiently democratic, as the people do not behave the way she thinks they ought to behave. Democracy would be smart, she says, if only people took it seriously, deliberated the right way, considered information the right way, tried hard as a collective to solve problems, etc. [...] The extant critics of democracy are not trying to prove that idealized democracy is incompetent; they are only try to prove that realistic democracy is incompetent. (Brennan 2014: 41-2)

Objections and criticism presented towards the theories of mass intelligence certainly do not exhaust the debate about reasonable results provided by the aggregation of preferences expressed by disinformed participants.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, relevant for the investigation is to consider political ignorance of the public as a multifaceted and serious issue in the field of democratic theory, which cannot be easily and painlessly avoided just by shifting the focus the focus from individuals to masses.

## **Conclusion**

The epistemic littleness of the demos as the Achilles heel of democracy constitutes, as mentioned, the epistocratic critique of democracy. The episteme is the problem from

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<sup>25</sup> Other authors feed the discussion on the theme. See Surowiecki (2004), Wittmann (1995), Page and Shapiro (1992). In Page (2015) the prognosis of little demos based on the individual level of political knowledge is rejected as "fallacy of composition": in fact, the public is more stable and responsive to the best available information than individuals.

which these theorists move and offers a precious angle of view for evaluating a model of power and society. The chapter tried to illustrate the starting problem, its scope and, importantly, its theoretical solidity. In this sense, some aspects presented in these pages will not be further developed because they are strictly connected with the epistocratic vision which, as we shall see, implies theoretical costs too high to be accepted. The critique of the theories of collective intelligence outlined, for instance, falls within the epistocratic conception of democracy as an *instrument for just decisions* which, in turn, rests on a precise notion of political knowledge. The problem of defining what is meant by political “knowledge/ignorance” is exactly the subject of the next chapter.

Indeed, literature on little demos paves the way to different queries: which political knowledge should be achieved by the citizenry? On which basis is this demand justified? But, even more importantly and basically, how political ignorance can be defined? Hobbits, Hooligans, Vulcans and Muggles effectively introduced the problem, but the contours of the concept are to be sketched. From the depiction of little demos and implications descending from it to punctual definition of political ignorance one step further is requested to set the board and define the elements of the normative enquiry.

## Chapter 2

### The Concept of Political Ignorance/Knowledge

«The greater the ignorance the greater the dogmatism»

William Osler

«As the world becomes more and more confusing, we tend to focus on the things that are right there in front of us. While ignoring the massive forces that actually change and shape our lives»

Film *Vice*

The first chapter introduces the reader to the epistocratic critique of democracy. This second chapter attempts to take a step forward by taking a step back. In fact, once identified the problem of the “little demos” as a point of access to a reflection on democracy and episteme, it is now necessary to specify what is meant here by episteme or, alternatively, by political knowledge (and, negatively, by political ignorance). The link between knowledge and politics evokes a multiplicity of historical, scientific, institutional information, which composes a set of elements *to be known*. In a nutshell, there is much to know in making political decisions. Furthermore, the normative nature of the investigation, that is, the goal to set a level of knowledge to be achieved or a level of ignorance to be avoided, poses obvious problems when applied to the democratic demos as a whole. In fact, the end here is to figure out a degree of epistemic enhancement that remains within people’s reach. These two problems encourage to clarify a twofold point. First, the analysis expunges several elements from the concept of political ignorance/knowledge by defending a factual interpretation of the episteme within political decision-making. Secondly, the knowledge that citizenship is expected to achieve can only be moderate, sometimes even modest. Political knowledge

represents in this sense a fundamental epistemic empowerment and does not sound as synonym of political wisdom or expertise.

The first section lays some premises on the phenomenon of political knowledge, clarifying how the interest in particular aspects of the political agenda and the need not to reach the levels of knowledge required of experts make the acquisition of political knowledge a viable undertaking. The section then focuses on the opinion polls of the USA and Italian electorate. The emerging data clarifies what significant segments of public opinion tend to ignore.

The second section seeks to systematize data and statistics on political knowledge by identifying three domains that characterize political knowledge as familiarity with the factual aspects of public debate. In particular, we will focus on knowledge about the rules of the game, the cruxes of the public debate and the actors of the political scene (parties and candidates).

Once the fields of political knowledge have been identified, the third section proposes a tolerance threshold for ignorance. Drawing on recent studies on the epistemology of ignorance, the level of blame for the political ignorance of citizens will be characterized through the concept of “epistemic insouciance”. The notion of political knowledge that is assumed therefore concerns the facts of politics (the three areas of the section 2) and demands that citizens engage with that information by winning insouciance.

Finally, the fourth section considers the role of morality in the knowledge of politics. Following the pattern of knowledge assumed by the epistocrats, the concluding pages of the chapter shall defend the need for an analytical distinction between politically ignorant citizens and morally evil ones. Morality and episteme represent intercommunicating but distinct spheres which respectively illuminate the foreground and background elements in the political deliberation of individuals.

## **1. What People Fail to Know about Politics**

### *Some Premises*

Before entering the analysis of the notion of political ignorance/knowledge, two premises should be considered. First, politics as a multidisciplinary field allows everyone to be included at the light of one's sensibility and expertise. Contemporary politics is in fact a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, characterized by several notions, different fields, articulated problems. As such, the salience of issues encompassed in political debate is itself disputable and establishing a hierarchy of problems' salience represents an intricate challenge, maybe without solution. One might firstly be focused on public order and safety, concerned with the State's task to protect the life of the citizens as Hobbes insisted and, thus, keep an eye on the functioning of police services, prisons, control of immigration, antiterrorism, and so on. Conversely, one might be more affected by the government's impact in the market economy. In fact, nations largely condition the economic trends by spending huge amounts of money in a wide number of policies and, besides that, determine the life of private businesses by providing specific rules and regulations. Further, others might be touched by matters of justice and commit themselves to monitor the decisions of the government on specific issues, such as discrimination of LGBT community or ethnic minorities. The tendency to deepen some aspects of the political debate and neglect others is the natural consequence of the spontaneous interests of individuals, which leads them to be knowledgeable about few issues, rather than to cultivate a generalist comprehension of the problems on the scene (Iyengar 1990). In this regard, the reflection on the informed citizen must necessarily take into account how political knowledge of citizens can develop vertically (very deep on a few issues) rather than horizontally (discrete on many issues). However, the weight of interests on acquiring information relevels the presence of many doors to enter political debate, and the possibility for citizens to select the most suited according to their concerns. Even admitting that many individuals develop a "vertical competence" (deep knowledge of few issues), the problem of political ignorance would remerge. In fact, to understand a specific phenomenon in depth implies knowledge – in broad terms – of connected

contexts. Interest for immigration, for example, should lead to understand socio-economic elements of the problem, the international scenario, the positions of the various political exponents on the issue. From one acquaintance, many other aspects are touched. Attention to some aspects of the political debate therefore does not exclude but facilitates the general knowledge of other fundamental aspects or, at least, implies it.

A second point should be made about the degree of knowledge that can be expected of people. Contributions expected by the citizenry should be different from the professional inputs politicians and related professionals are expected to provide. Without undermining the role of the people, to swim in the troubled waters of political decision-making is not up to them: rather, they are bound to select those swimmers and influence the tide. Accordingly, and encouragingly, avoiding political ignorance does not entail mastering policy making as an expert would do, but rather to accept a lighter epistemic load and accomplish a second line task (Talisso 2006: 463). Simply put, political knowledge at stake does not represent a synonym for political expertise. This premise may sound trivial and self-evident, but it is not, in that it helps pinpointing the sore question behind an approach to democratic theory centered on citizens' limited capacity of understanding political dynamics. Such perspective over people's conduct seems to take for granted that knowledge about public affairs is something natural, spontaneous, and easy. Consequently, evidence that people fail to satisfy this expectation represents the breeding ground for snobby perspectives over people's attitudes and worldviews. Critical approach to political ignorance might in this sense become part of wider snobbish attitude by investigating the role and the capacity of the people through elitist lens. Sandel has glimpsed a similar development in the consecration of meritocracy and in the consolidation of a political storytelling focused on the centrality of competence as the core of public ethics.

In every age, politicians and opinion makers, publicists and advertisers, reach for a language of judgment and evaluation they hope will persuade. Such rhetoric typically draws upon evaluative contrasts: just versus unjust, free versus unfree, progressive versus reactionary, strong versus

weak, open versus closed. In recent decades, as meritocratic modes of thinking have gained ascendance, the reigning evaluative contrast has become smart versus dumb. (Sandel 2020: 92)

The rhetoric of “smart” versus “dumb” refers particularly individuals’ behavior in society. Dumbness embodies the dark side in the axiological scale of contemporary societies. Given these premises, one can easily comprehend why college-educated people in Belgium, UK, Netherlands, and United States dislike less educated more than they do against other disfavored groups, such as Muslims, people who are poor, obese, blind (Sandel 2020: 95). Of course, poor education and ignorance do not completely overlap. Moreover, not all forms of ignorance in themselves embitter elites by eliciting a reaction of contempt. For instance, there is no surprise neither scandal to acknowledge that people are in the dark about the progress in string theory or the debate about the historicity of Homer. On the contrary, blissful ignorance in politics is not so easily excused and elitist observers are more inclined to shout scandal and stigmatize people’s political illiteracy. So, generalizing Sandel’s reconstruction, elites tend to place enormous weight on the epistemic status of people and encourage the proclivity to understand a refined knowledge as the only possible answer to ignorance (i.e., again, to pretend that Hobbits and Hooligans get mutated into Vulcans). Overall, these observations allow us to formulate two simple points starting from the elitist contempt for people’s ignorance and, in particular, for political ignorance. First, political ignorance is less easily excused than other forms of ignorance because – intuitively – politics is perceived as something that concerns everyone, that people can get to know from different points of interest, and that constitutes a structural element of the democratic decision-making process.<sup>26</sup> A second point concerns the level of political knowledge. An elitist approach to the problem of political ignorance assumes too easily that political knowledge is given and that, if anything, the problem lies in its modest

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<sup>26</sup> On people’s role in democratic framework and its implications on political knowledge we shall return. See chapter 3, first section. Political knowledge as structural element (background element) of decision-making is discussed in section 4 of this chapter.

level. In contrast to such an approach and in line with empirical research on the subject, assumption made here is quite different: political knowledge is often non-existent (that is, many citizens are know-nothing) and, accordingly, the degree of political knowledge represents a synonym for political literacy, that is, a modest empowerment to understand the *facts* of politics.

### *Political Ignorance in USA*

Returning the opening point of the section, political ignorance raises several questions and causes different reactions. A first glance at the information citizenry fails to know makes elitists' impression more palatable, if not acceptable. Nevertheless, such data alone are not self-evident and the epistemological and moral expectation just sketched set the stage for a philosophical examination of such concept.

A first collection of data about the knowledge of the American electorate is collected in Somin's *Democracy and Political Ignorance*. The first table (1.1) summarizes some of data collected prior to 2010 Midterm elections (Somin 2013: 22).

Question	% Correct Answer	% Wrong Answer	% Admit Don't Know
Knew that the deficit in 2010 was larger than in the 1990s.	77	12	11
Knew that Congress had passed a health care reform bill in 2010.	73	14	13
Knew that the unemployment rate was 10 percent (rather than 5, 15, or 20).	53	30	17

<sup>27</sup> All the tests were conducted in 2010. Data from Pew Research Center surveys



Knew that Republicans won control of the House of Representatives, but not the Senate in the 2010 election.	46	27	27
Knew that U.S. forces suffered more combat deaths in Afghanistan than in Iraq in 2009.	43	32	25
Knew that defense is the largest category of spending in the federal budget. <sup>28</sup>	39	42	19
Knew that Harry Reid is the majority leader of the Senate.	38	18	44
Knew the TARP bailout bill was enacted under Bush rather than Obama.	34	47	19
Knew that the economy grew during 2010.	33	61	6
Knew that John Roberts is the chief justice of the Supreme Court.	28	18	53
Knew that David Cameron is the prime minister of Great Britain.	15	25	60

The second table (1.2) is relative to surveys conducted before 2008 elections, when also the presidency was to be won (Somin 2013: 26-7).

TABLE 1.2 – Political ignorance and the 2008 USA elections <sup>29</sup>
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<sup>28</sup> The options given on this question were “national defense”, “education”, “Medicare”, and “Interest on the debt”.

<sup>29</sup> All the tests were conducted in 2010. Data from Pew Research Center surveys

Question	% Correct Answer	% Wrong Answer	% Admit Don't Know
Knew Obama supported a timetable for withdrawal from Iraq.	76	6	19
Knew John McCain opposed a timetable for withdrawal from Iraq.	62	20	18
Knew Nancy Pelosi was the speaker of the House of Representatives.	66	34	-
Know the Democrats controlled the House of Representatives before the election.	61	22	18
Know Saddam Hussein was not "directly involved" in the September 11 attacks.	56	34	10
Knew that Hillary Clinton had proposed a plan requiring all Americans to have health insurance.	42	31	27
Knew Obama did not propose the plan requiring all Americans to have health insurance.	35	24	41
Knew that Henry (Hank) Paulson was secretary of the treasury.	36	64	-
Knew that U.S. defense spending is between \$400 billion and \$599 billion per year.	7	48	45
Knew that Gordon Brown was the prime minister of Great Britain.	28	14	58

Less systematically, it is possible to touch upon some significant data, useful to capture the general knowledge of Americans about political issues or about questions admittedly relevant for understanding political scenario and taking a stand. During election year most citizens cannot identify any congressional candidates in their districts (Hardin 2009: 60), whereas 70% of them cannot name both of their state's senators (Somin 1999: 401). Moreover, most citizens ignore what the three branches of government are, or what these branches have the power to do (Brennan 2016: 29). Besides, American people vastly overestimate the amount of money spent on foreign aid, thinking that about the 18% of federal budget is devoted to do that – it is less than 1% (Hardin 2009: 60). Even more, many of them argue that budget deficit can be reduced by cutting foreign aid (Brennan 2016: 26). The incidence of false beliefs on political positions is explicated by Hardin by discussing exactly the case of foreign aid. «When people are informed about the true amount of foreign aid, they change their minds and favor increasing it. Thus, citizens who base their votes for anti-internationalist candidates partly on their opposition to high levels of foreign aid are voting against their actual beliefs» (Hardin 2006: 181). Moreover, Hardin questions electorate ability to take the hint when decided to approve through referenda a “three strikes” sentencing law and an initiative in support of open primaries. In an early case to which the new law was applied, a one-slice-of-pizza thief was sentenced to a term of 25 years to life, with no possibility of parole before serving at least 20 years. On the other hand, the initiative in support of primaries, would have disallowed California representation at the national party nominating conventions and, accordingly, was overturned with finality by the courts (*California Democratic Party v. Jones* 2000). «Is it conceivable that the voters knew that this is what they were endorsing?» (Hardin 2006: 180).

As emerged by the table above, electors struggle to associate candidates with their platforms: discussing 2000 presidential elections, Brennan stresses how citizens hardly get the meaning of the word *liberal*. In fact, less than 50% of surveyed people knew that Gore was more supportive than his competitor G.W. Bush of abortion rights,

welfare state programs, higher degree of aid to blacks, and environmental regulation (Brennan 2016: 26). In this sense, empirical observations made by Converse in 1964 concerning the difficulties of the people in knowing the meaning of *conservatism* and *liberalism* are still actual (Converse 2006).

Going back in the time, surprising data emerge. In 1945, only 12% of the public could identify the Bretton Wood Plan. In 1964, only 38% on Americans knew that the Soviet Union was not a member of NATO, the alliance of Western European and North American countries born precisely in an anti-Soviet function. In 1972 President Nixon visited People's Republic of China and met its leader Mao Zedong, opening a new era of diplomatic relations with communist world: that year, 37% of American citizens fail to know China to be communist (Page and Shapiro 1992: 10-11). All in all, a broad portion of Americans, between 20 and 33%, are labelled in the literature as “know-nothings”: they simply lack the basic coordinates to orient themselves in political debate. Bennett effectively depicts this condition by recalling Stein's account of mind-boggling ignorance among young Californians, they «may well not be prepared for even the most basic national responsibility – understanding what the society is about and why it must be preserved» (Bennett 1988: 489).

### *Political Ignorance in Italy*

Not to narrow our analysis to the American political environment, data from a different democracy should be considered, at least to figure out whether electorate of another country suffers in broad terms the same difficulties in acquiring political information. To this end, let's briefly see the surveys collected in Italy, a European country which, differently from the USA, is characterized by Parliamentarism and proportional (or mixed) electoral system.<sup>30</sup> Already in 1963, Almond and Verba have observed in

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<sup>30</sup> From 1946 to 1993 Italy had a proportional system. From 1993 to 2005 a mixed electoral system was in effect: three fourths of seats in Parliament were assigned according to first-past-the-post rules.

Italian democracy disaffection with democratic practices, lack of interest in politics, and low-level information about political discussion (Almond and Verba 1963). As said, USA are not rare birds in terms of citizens' political ignorance. Results from American polls embody a structural trait of Western democratic society. A first table summarizing Italians' knowledge of politics can be derived from ITANES surveys discussed by Memoli (2011). The study divides the questions about political knowledge in "factual knowledge" and "ideological knowledge".<sup>31</sup>

Questions	2001	2004	2006
<i>Factual Knowledge</i>			
People able to name the current Prime Minister.	60	64	69
People able to name the current President of the Chamber of Deputies.	40	42	48
People able to name the current Foreign Minister.	37	39	43
People able to tell how the President of the Republic is elected.	61	63	69
<i>Ideological Knowledge</i>			
People able to place the "Democratici di Sinistra"	84	85	88
People able to place "Rifondazione Comunista"	86	87	90
People able to place "Alleanza Nazionale"	85	86	88

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From 2006 to 2017, a proportional system with a majority bonus was introduced. Finally, from 2018, a mixed system returned: two thirds of the seats are assigned with first-past-the-post system and a third with a proportional system. (Novelli 2018)

<sup>31</sup> This study characterizes "factual" knowledge as familiarity with the most important political actors. During the analysis we shall assume a different perspective, according to which the "facts" of politics concern fundamental information on the rules of the game, the cruxes of public debate and – indeed – the players on the political scene. See next section.

People able to place “Forza Italia” <sup>32</sup>	88	89	91
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It is worth noting that the positive increase of “factual” political knowledge is explained by the fact that in the period 2001-2006 no elections took place and, accordingly, the same persons served as Prime Minister and President of the Chamber<sup>33</sup>. Moreover, in 2006 a new president of the Republic was elected and, consequently, the election procedure was mentioned many times in public discussion. This might represent a factor explaining the peak of 69% (6 points more than 2004) of people knowing how the President is elected. Finally, ignorance of politicians is countered by a good knowledge of party ideologies.

A further and more recent analysis of people knowledge has been conducted by the Ipsos’ study on perception about key social data. In 2014 ranking on that issue, Italy places first among 14 countries, and eighteenth among 37 countries in 2018 (Duffy 2018).<sup>34</sup> Pagnoncelli summarizes and discusses the data concerning Italy, emphasizing the most surprising data, and stressing the weight of such misbeliefs in forming political ideas (Pagnoncelli 2019).

Questions (Year of the survey)	Average Answer	Correct Answer
Immigrants in Italian population (2014)	30%	7%
Muslims in Italian population (2014)	20%	2%

<sup>32</sup> These parties respectfully embody ideals of center-left, left, right, center-right.

<sup>33</sup> Foreign minister in 2001 was Franco Frattini, replaced in 2004 by Gianfranco Fini. However, Fini was the leader of the party “Alleanza Nazionale” and, because of that, was a key figure in political debate and well-known by the public. In this light, it is no surprise that percentage of people able to name the foreign minister peaked in 2006.

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.ipsos.com/it-it/perils-perception-why-were-wrong-about-nearly-everything> and <https://www.ipsos.com/en-hk/perils-perception-2018>

Estimated Muslims in Italian population in 4 years (2016)	31%	5% <sup>35</sup>
Population older than 65 years (2014)	48%	22%
Problem of single mothers: percentage of births from mother between 15 and 19 years old (2014)	17%	0,5%
Unemployment rate (2014)	49%	12%
NEET “Not in Education, Employment, or Training” between 18- and 34-years old population (2014)	51%	35%

Such a conspicuous overestimation of immigration and unemployment, for example, makes people easily vulnerable to fake news and demagoguery, as well as constituting a very powerful bias in evaluating the different political proposals. As observed by Hardin for the American electorate, even in the case of Italy it is intuitively easy to see under the data cited a great difficulty on the part of many citizens to orient themselves both in the political debate and in the political decision-making process.

However, this large amount of data hardly suggests a clear line of interpretation about what political ignorance embodies in relation to the problem of little demos. For this reason, rather than adding other data, it is necessary to outline the concept of political ignorance, sketch the contours of the notions it incorporates and, consequently, figure out on which basis is democratic mechanism jammed (and adjustable).

## 2. Decomposing Ignorance

### *The Rules of the Game*

The plethora of data cited in the previous paragraph does not capture the conceptual core of political ignorance. Looking at the polls, it turns out that people either fail to imbibe relevant information about political background, or they misperceive data and

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<sup>35</sup> Percentage estimated in 2016 for the year 2020.

trends about social key facts. However, what remains unanswered concerns the structure of ignorance under consideration. To put another way, a meta-analysis of people's political unawareness is required to investigate such data through the lens of normative democratic theory. Accordingly, the leading question is no longer "what people fail to know?" but "what people are expected to know as democratic citizens?". This reconnects investigation on people beliefs and misbeliefs spotted by surveys to the investigation on democracy and its distortions.

The inquiry about democratic demos' capability to understand politics can be approached from different perspective and at least two different questions arise. First, one might focus on the *domains* that make up political knowledge and investigate the different aspects that citizens should consider in forming their political positions. Second, attention might be drawn by the level of political ignorance and the necessity to track the boundary line separating knowledgeable citizens and ignorant ones or, as we shall see, to identify blameworthy ignorance. This second approach stresses the elements which makes political ignorance something blameful from normative perspective and, in doing this, spotlights the *threshold* of the epistemic phenomenon under consideration. Given these two possible perspectives, this section addresses the set of questions emerging from the analysis of the domains that compose political knowledge. Terminologically, the following analysis focuses on the epistemic character identified and described in the discussion of the "little demos". It is worth noting that both the notions of political ignorance and political knowledge identify the same complex of information and capabilities and, consequently, investigation shall refer to both the concepts, focusing either on the presence or on the absence of such epistemic heritage in political deliberation of democratic citizens.

Analytically, political ignorance can be understood as the sum and overlap of three different forms of ignorance. To this end, political ignorance can be broken down into various spheres in order to shed light on the different fields in which political unawareness develops. A first epistemic component of political ignorance is the *ignorance about the rules of the game*. In the contest of democratic theory, "rules of



the game” consists in a set of norms and procedures which regulate political competition between parties/politicians and sets forth the process to realize their own desiderata in democratic regimes (e.g. pass bills, implement policies, ratify or invalidate international agreements). Rules of democratic game are contained first and foremost in the constitution, which establishes the institutional arrangement of the society and specifies the procedures to allocate political power and take collective decisions. Unquestionably, the constitution alone does not provide an exhaustive knowledge of democratic rules. Other notions seem necessary to fully understand procedures, prerogatives, limits of political players (administrative law, international law, and so forth). As declared, identification of the areas of political knowledge is only the first step and problem of “threshold” returns and needs to be clarified.

As for other games, the rules clarify the wiggle room for players to accomplish their goals in the arena and offers, *inter alia*, a fundamental parameter to deliberate about public issues and take political decisions. To clarify this point in a trivial way, think of a football match and consider the idea of the coach to win that match (the end) by asking one of the players to neutralize the ace of the opposing team with fouls and misconduct (the means). Knowing the rules of the game, as mentioned, clarifies, among other things, the limits of such a strategy. In the example proposed, the rules in question are those of the game of football which provides for the red card for specific fouls and misconduct. Accordingly, one could easily point out that the plan of the coach would probably provoke the dismissal of the player in charge of man-marking the opposing ace, this in turn would lead the team to play outnumbered and, consequently, would seriously jeopardize the goal of winning the game. A basic knowledge of the rules of the game unmask a losing strategy and is thus crucial to act as political decision-maker. Differently from football, basketball permits intentional fouling to gain a strategic advantage: in many other sports it is considered unfair and gets sanctioned more severely. With this awareness, coach Don Nelson adopted the strategy of committing intentional fouls to the purpose of lowering opponents’ scoring. Such strategy had to target opponents who shot free throws poorly became famous as “Hack-

a-Shaq” as it was effectively adopted against Hall of Fame center Shaquille O’Neal. This different instance of strategy centered on knowledge of the rules of the game allows to clarify a point. Knowledge of the rules of the game is a fundamental tool for “getting into the game”, at different levels: as a player, as a coach, as a fan. The knowledge of the rules, we shall see, confers a minimal but fundamental empowerment to understand and be part of the dynamics of the game itself. In the case of democracy and citizenship, this type of competence represents an enhancement to be actors in the decision-making process.

Returning to politics, awareness of the rules of the democratic game represents a first decisive area of political knowledge. Familiarity with rules allows citizens to better access proposals on the scene, to figure out to what extent players in the political field promote sensible approach to policymaking or muddy the waters with propaganda. Division of power represents an example of rules of the game in democratic regimes. Tellingly, a 2006 survey conducted in the United States found that only 42 percent of citizens were able to name the three powers of the federal government, and more than 50 percent were unfamiliar with the functions of the three branches (Somin 2013: 19). Those citizens provide an instance of ignorance about the rules of the game. Without this information, citizens would find themselves at the mercy of unattainable proposals and, therefore, would struggle to act in the public context as political decision-makers. Parties and politicians might argue that the achievement of common good requires the recognition of new rules and, for the sake of all, democracy needs to be overcome. Even admitting the possibility for politicians to make proposals hostile to the rules of the democratic game, the knowledge of those same rules is crucial to glimpse the risks (or the hopes) behind certain political platform. So, for instance, if people tend to ignore what the division of powers is, they struggle to see the authoritarianism of certain positions because, after all, for them the democratically elected president already has near-imperial prerogatives. Basically, to know the rules of the democratic system offers the first empowerment to decide whether preserve or dismantle that system.

## *The Cruxes of the Public Debate*

A second epistemic sphere composing political ignorance is *ignorance about the cruxes of public debate*. By “cruxes of public debate” are meant the thematic crossroads, the pivotal points, the keystones of political discussion. These cruxes represent the most discussed issues in the democratic forum, the ones standing out for their relevance. Delli Carpini and Keeter defines this field as the “substance of politics”, that is, the major domestic and international issues of the day, current social and economic conditions, key policy initiatives and so forth (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996: 14). At first glance, the concept can appear vague, if not arbitrary: who can decide which topics are the most relevant for the electors? Are there overriding values? Such questions miss the point. The fact that cruxes are given do not undermine individual liberty to prioritize neither denies persistent disagreement characterizing epistemic circumstances of democracy (Peter 2016). Put another way, politics has not to do exclusively with imminent tasks and technical notions, but rather there is a large space for discussion on principles, ideals and traditions supported by single citizens (Bell 2015: 74). Given these premises, still, some themes emerge for their weight. Such themes should not be evaluated in axiological terms: rather, they embody *pragmatical priorities* by virtue of their urgency, the high numbers of citizens affected and the influence on the other issues of the agenda.

For instance, 2019 UK general elections picked up many issues: among them, Brexit certainly represented one of the cruxes of public debate. As specified, an elector is not expected to be more interested in Brexit than in other topics: every elector has the right to freely prioritise. However, the selection and the judgement of representatives should include, among the other concerns, a standpoint on Brexit as crux of debate, as strategical priority for the future of the country.<sup>36</sup> Here again, cruxes of public debate

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<sup>36</sup> Not surprisingly, the word “Brexit” was central in the official slogan of three among main parties (Conservative: «Get Brexit Done. Unleash Britain's Potential»; Liberal: «Stop Brexit. Build a Brighter Future»; UK Independence Party: «Time To Get On With Brexit!»).

as second sphere of political knowledge (or ignorance, depending on the perspective) explains the salience of social key data mentioned above for grasping political dynamics and taking a position. Let's focus on Italian unemployment and immigration surveys mentioned above. Italy suffered a severe employment crisis after the 2008 financial crisis, and this made the government's ability to tackle unemployment even more central to public discussion. Likewise, immigration as a social problem has often hit the headlines in the tense years of the refugee crisis and fueled campaigns by right-wing Eurosceptic parties. In this regard, people have been interviewed on these issues precisely because unemployment and immigration are on everyone's lips, especially on the lips of politicians. Due to their relevance in public discussions, misperceptions about unemployment and the presence of immigrants reveal a certain degree of nonchalance in reflecting on the state of affairs. In 2014 Italians overestimated the number of Muslims present in the country by ten times, the number of immigrants by four and a half times and, they thought that one in two Italians did not have a job (real percentage was 12%). One might argue that behind the sensations of the public hide a grain of truth that numbers alone are not able to portray. According to this reading, people *feel* the problem without knowing the numbers. However, such objection disregards that misperceptions are exactly the breeding ground for *false* beliefs and convictions, especially in the fields of politics. As the Italian economist Cottarelli pointed out, hoaxes almost always grounds on something true, even more, the most catching hoaxes are manipulations of collective feelings (Cottarelli 2019).

Jeremy Waldron recognizes the presence of cruxes in political decision-making by criticizing the "expressive" account of voting (i.e., the interpretation of the vote as a mere affirmation of ideals and the consideration of the issues that matter to the voter). According to Waldron, the voters have the responsibility not to cut out of their reasoning the big issues, the cruxes, that are defined – echoing Delli Carpini and Keeter – as "the substance of politics".

If voting determines outcomes as serious as war and peace, liberty and oppression, poverty and equality, surely it is irresponsible to regard individual votes as a form of flamboyant self-expression. In other words, expressivist accounts of the importance of participation convey the misleading impression that the substance of politics – the decisions to be made and their implications for real people – matter less than the catharsis, the righteous sense of commitment, and the agonistic flair involved in publicly identifying a particular view as one’s own. (Waldron 1998: 317) <sup>37</sup>

Waldron’s comment highlights the existence of pragmatic priorities that must be considered as core of political decision-making. Waldron’s controversy with the expressivist theory of voting anticipates the tension between the preferences of individuals and the elements that depend on the decision-making context in which one operates. We shall see that the epistemic contribution of knowledge constitutes a fundamental means of reflecting on one’s own moral priorities. But, before this, episteme enlightens decision-makers on the circumstances in which they operate.

### *Political Players*

The third sphere of political ignorance is about people and organizations directly involved in managing public affairs: representatives, rulers, and parties. Given the centrality of those players, the last shade of political ignorance is defined as *ignorance about political players*. Focal point of ignorance about players changes according to kind of electoral system under consideration. First-Past-the-Post systems inevitably shift the focus on the single candidate’s beliefs and virtues; whereas proportional systems spotlight parties’ proposals and reliability (Dahl 1998: 130-141). However, in

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<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Elster describes the enjoyment deriving from political debate as parasitic on decision-making. «Although discussion and deliberation in other contexts may be independent sources of enjoyment, the satisfaction one derives from political discussion is parasitic on decision making. Political debate is about what to do—not about what ought to be the case. It is defined by this practical purpose, not by its subject matter» (Elster 1997: 25).

both the scenarios this guise of ignorance is identified by people’s difficulties to access reputation and ideas of the protagonists on the political stage.

The knowledge of players in politics can be broken down into two political-epistemic approaches which obviously overlap in reality. First, “retrospective knowledge” considers what players has done in past by looking at their reputation in terms of “morality” and “ability”. Second, “prospective knowledge” takes into account their ideas and projects about the future.

Retrospective knowledge		Prospective knowledge
Morality	Ability	Ideas / Project
Ex. Corruption	Ex. Achievements	Ex. Platform

Retrospective knowledge makes a judgment based on the reputation politicians/parties enjoy. A first aspect of reputation revolves around moral conduct. This aspect betrays vices and virtue of actors (both individuals and parties) in managing money, treating others, respecting the law, being coherent with professed values. Behind the salience given to reputation hides the believe that habit and repetition play pivotal part in forming one’s attitudes, that routine and inclinations have much power to form men’s character. As Phillips Brooks brilliantly noted, character may be manifested in the great moments, but it is made in the small ones.<sup>38</sup> Attention towards reputation tries to detect these – not always “small” – moments and attempts to figure out how potential political decision-makers would approach big ones. An example of knowledge about political actors’ morality is their resistance to corruption. Cases of corruption immediately evokes strong reactions by citizens which intuitively associate “corruption” with moral

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<sup>38</sup> Aristotle’s contribution (and the tradition inaugurated by him) is cardinal on the formation of character and its centrality in the moral identity of the individual. «For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them, e.g. men become builders by building and lyre players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts» (Aristotle 2009: 23).

blameworthiness. As Mulgan observes, corruption «carries very strong moral – indeed, moralizing — overtones, redolent of ‘evil’ and ‘sin’, suggesting both universalistic standards of right and wrong and a sense of righteous outrage at the practices in question» (Mulgan 2012: 27). Also in utilitarian terms, corruption represents a stigma as well. Corruption is in fact perceived as a vulnus to the credibility of the candidates also from a utilitarian point of view, since their motivation to act in the interest of the voters is drastically questioned. «To secure voters’ pocketbooks voters must make sure officials are working primarily for them, not for their own or other’ interest. [...] Information about corruption, if it is in any degree credible, suggests to the voter that leaders are not keeping up their end of the bargain» (Fackler and Lin 1995: 978).

A second aspect of “retrospective knowledge” revolves around the “ability” of the candidates, their capacity to get things done, to provide results. Certainly, this kind of judgement is easier to formulate towards serving politicians than towards first-time candidates. Theorists of “retrospective theory of voting” concentrate exactly on incumbents’ performances and understands voting as the power to confirm those skillful and reject those incompetent (Key 1966; Morris Fiorina 1981; Schumpeter 1994). In this reading, what should count are previous achievements: bills passed, measures implemented, courageous filibusters, effective negotiations on international agreements, and so on. Achievements represent a central yardstick even in case of debuting candidates. In that case, people might ground their evaluations on credentials, track record, accomplishment in their professional career. Those parameters are useful shortcuts for outsiders to formulate reasonable judgements on insiders’ capacity and trustworthiness (Moore 2017: 80-89). On this point, contribution of Tinagli is significant. In her analysis of Italian parliamentary and governmental ruling class, she stresses the weight of education, professional experience, and work ethic to be a successful politician, capable to get things done (Tinagli 2019: 19-25).<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> In politics not all positions are the same and, accordingly, different competences must be distinguished. Competences required by executive positions are different from legislative ones.

Admittedly, candidates' achievements in career or even conquests in political past are not an infallible indicator of future success. More generally and more vaguely, the point here is that political knowledge cannot ignore reliability of political players. Therefore, faith in candidates cannot ground on indifference toward their story and it sounds surprisingly that more than 50% of American citizens do not even know who is running for office in their district and ignore which party controls the Congress – of which they claim not to trust (Somin 2013: 17-21; Van Reybrouck 2016: 10).

To conclude, knowledge about political actors has a prospective component, which looks to the future based on politicians' platform and values. To clarify the point through an example, in 2000 US Presidential Election less than 50% of interviewed electors knew the difference between republican candidate Bush and democratic candidate Gore about very general (and relevant) issues such as abortion rights, guns control and jobs protections (Somin 2013: 62). Lack of familiarity about candidates' (or parties') positions on such points of political agenda makes electors blind in the selecting their representatives, at least in relation to the values people themselves want to protect and enact.

### **3. Political Ignorance, Epistemic Insouciance, and Muggles**

#### *Tracking the Threshold of Tolerable Political Ignorance*

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Ministers need managerial skills: budgeting for projects, signing contracts, liaising with technical departments (Yong and Hazell 2011: 15-19). Members of the Parliaments, conversely, are more concerned by controlling power and promote bill which the government and administration will then implement (Wright 2010; Cassese 2020). However, there are numerous contact points between the careers of MPs and ministries. Parliamentary background is the main career path to becoming a minister in Western European democracies. From the 1945 to 1985, roughly 75% of all Western European government ministers were members of parliament before becoming part of the government (Blondel 1991).



Previous section has recognized two different approaches to set out the concept of political ignorance/knowledge in democratic theory. First, we have dealt with the problem of domains, that is, the different areas of “political ignorance/knowledge”. This line of inquiry has led to the acknowledgement of the three different spheres analyzed above. The present section grapples with the set of problems raising from the question about the “threshold” of political ignorance by investigating to what extent and according to which criteria political ignorance can be considered blameworthy. This second approach is crucial from a normative perspective as it sets the bar of political knowledge required to democratic citizenship and, thus, defines the epistemic burden democratic demos must load on its shoulders.

Focus on the “threshold” of political ignorance implicitly betrays tolerance for ignorance itself. In fact, ignorance becomes culpable only beyond the threshold, whereas it remains excusable if threshold is not overpassed.<sup>40</sup> Tolerance towards ignorance descends from intrinsic difficulties implied in understanding politics. Particularly, previous passages have tarried over the complexity of contemporary politics. Danilo Zolo brilliantly characterizes “complexity” of post-industrial democracies as the cognitive situation in which citizens are set and must orient themselves. In his view, «“complexity” does not describe objective properties of natural or social phenomena [...] it refers to the cognitive situation in which agents, whether they are individuals or social groups, find themselves» (Zolo 1992: 2). At the light of numerous problems contemporary politics deals with and the sophistication achieved by the disciplines serving politics, it sounds admittable that a certain degree of ignorance is not only excusable but easily foreseeable. Complexity in politics is a consequent of complexity of social order. In fact, the epistemic load for individuals increasingly grows up given the specialization and division of labor. Accordingly,

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<sup>40</sup> It is worth reminding that the same concept can be expressed by centering the reasoning on the notion of “political knowledge”. In that case, threshold would separate required knowledge from supererogatory one. Turning the argument, it would be culpable *not* to achieve certain level of knowledge.

people often lack the capacity to overview social problem, which entangles many and different areas of expertise. A drastic version of this argument is presented by Rancière, who reads division of labor as the reappearance of platonic social order, where absolute dedication to one's own work prevents people from being able to access other, more general, problems (Rancière 2009). Without embracing Rancière's position, there is no doubt that specialization and division of labor certainly complicate the "cognitive situation" in which contemporary citizens are immersed, even more if politics itself is so structured.

Very few experts or geeky enthusiasts could master all the topics of political debate, since that target requires time, energy, passion, and skills. Even political leaders suffer from political ignorance as they cannot proficiently understand all the facets of political debate and decision-making. This rarely emerges in public debate since prominent figures are renitent to admit their ignorance.<sup>41</sup> In this sense, a certain degree of political ignorance is permanent in contemporary democratic societies and should not be scandalous. Not fortuitously, Brennan has described perfectly competent and rational citizens – the Vulcans – as paradigmatic figures rather than a real class of extremely knowledgeable denizens. De facto, Vulcans do not exist in real democracies or, at least, are few exceptions. A realist taxonomy would only include hobbits, hooligans, or muggles. Given their outstanding capacities, Vulcans cannot even constitute the normative divide between culpable and excusable political ignorance spread in the citizenry. Transformation into "Vulcan" might depict the ideal horizon for an ambitious politician or political scientist, but it would represent a supererogatory goal for ordinary citizens. Despite appearance, the acknowledgment of Vulcans-driven democracy as

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<sup>41</sup> Stewart, for instance, emphasizes this aspect in dealing with ignorance in world of business. «[A]ny leader would be a fool to reveal that he or she is ignorant. [...] Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that this message has uncomfortable parallels to examples of everyday behaviour in business. No manager wants to appear unknowledgeable to his or her supervisor, and admitting ignorance can be seen as a sign of weakness and incompetence. Rather, managers generally want to be seen to increase their knowledge, and in so doing, presumably decrease their ignorance» (Stewart 2015: 370).

utopia does not prevent normative democratic theory from establishing a level of political information that people should acquire. Vulcans are not the unique model to imagine an “enlightened” involvement of the demos and make real democracy more consistent with its theoretical and axiological framework (see chapter 3). A profound democratic renewal is possible by relying on an ambitious but possible model of citizenship, whose strength is rooted in the real epistemic capacities of the people and does not imply the utopistic requirement to transform amateurs into professionals. Recalling Brennan’s categories, Vulcans represent an unattainable and unlikely goal whereas Hobbits and Hooligans are respectively the emblem of a deeply uninformed and irrational demos. For this reason, a fourth category of democratic citizen was presented in the previous chapter: the Muggles. Consequently, it was imagined a form of popular participation which, far from being devoid of epistemic limits, associates the amateurism of the people with taking charge of the episteme in political deliberation. In what follows, Muggles’ approach to political knowledge shall be characterized and defined as the threshold of tolerable political ignorance (or the necessary political knowledge). Out of metaphor, the intolerable “threshold” of political ignorance is equivalent to the gnoseological concept of the “epistemic insouciance” that we are about to analyze.

### *Ignorance as Epistemic Vice*

Taking a step back, issues like the definition of ignorance, discussions about which kind of ignorance is culpable, and repercussions of ignorance in different fields, fits into the epistemological debate of “ignorance studies”.<sup>42</sup> In “ignorance studies”, helpful intuitions about threshold of political ignorance have come from recent

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<sup>42</sup> Debate about the nature of ignorance is characterized by three main theses: ignorance as lack of knowledge (Le Morvan 2013), ignorance as lack of true beliefs (Peels, 2011), ignorance as false knowledge (DeNicola 2017). A brilliant reconstruction of the problems centered on ignorance and the numerous implication it has in different scopes is provided by Arfini (2021).

developments in “vice epistemology”, that is, the study of bad and culpable attitude towards knowledge. Ignorance can be considered as blameworthy and, thus, normatively relevant if it is connected to failures in epistemic enterprises. Pritchard argues that «there is a normative dimension to ignorance, in the sense that it implies a specific kind of intellectual failing on the subject’s part. In particular, the sort of intellectual failing in question is one concerned with a failing of good inquiry» (Pritchard 2021: 6).

Failure is made normatively significant by the silent assumption that good inquiry represents an end to be achieved. In the case of democracy, the role of political knowledge as normative end to be realized will be consider in next chapter. What matters now – for the sake of argument – is to accept political knowledge of the demos as “good” for democracy and, consequently, to conceive the failure represented by political ignorance as problematic from a normative point of view.

One could easily object that not all epistemic failures constitute normative significant actions. Effectively, Cassam considers the case of a person suffering from insomnia (Cassam 2019: IX). In that case, the agent could encounter difficulties in the inquiry and failure is possible, if not probable. However, the failure here originates from circumstances beyond the agent’s control and, therefore, of which the agent is not imputable (insomnia).<sup>43</sup> Rather, failures are vulnerable to blame if the agent is in some sense responsible for that.<sup>44</sup> Cassam characterizes this scenario with the notion of “epistemic vice” and gives the example of the arrogance with which the Bush administration planned the Iraq pacification.

Intellectual vices or, as I prefer to call them, ‘epistemic’ vices are systematically harmful ways of thinking, attitudes, or character traits. Epistemic vices are, first and foremost, epistemically

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<sup>43</sup> In the example, the author obviously considers insomnia as a pathology, excluding cases related to the bad actions of the agent (e.g. excessive coffee consumption).

<sup>44</sup> Culpable failures depend on agent’s responsibility, and they might be vulnerable to both blameworthiness and criticism. On this distinction we will come back.

harmful and the other harms they cause – including political harms – are a consequence of their epistemic harms. [...] Epistemic vices are intellectual defects that get in the way of knowledge, and the point of calling them vices is to suggest that they are blameworthy or in some other sense reprehensible. In these terms, the intellectual arrogance that contributed to the Iraq fiasco was an epistemic vice but insomnia is not even if chronic lack of sleep makes us worse at gaining or retaining knowledge. Insomnia is neither an intellectual defect nor, at least in most cases, blameworthy. (Cassam 2019: viii-ix)

Epistemic vices get in the way of knowledge, that is, they obstruct the agent's possibility to know something. Political ignorance is an epistemic vice since it jeopardizes demos' capacity to know the rules of the game, the cruxes of the public debate and the political players. To imbibe information about those issues represents for demos what Battaly defines as "intellectual goal": «pursuing or avoiding: beliefs, knowledge, ideas, understanding, learning, and inquiry»<sup>45</sup> (Battaly 2017: 671).

Political ignorance represents an epistemic vice as a failure of an inquiry or, in Battaly's terminology, a failure in the pursuit of an "intellectual goal". As shown in dealing with the case of insomnia, the blameworthiness of ignorance as an epistemic vice depends on the responsibility of the individual, on the way in which he or she has acted for the pursuit of this epistemic end. Besides the role played by epistemic vices as "intellectual defects", one might observe that certain failures in epistemic inquiry depends on the difficulty of the challenge at issue. In the failure of an extremely difficult cognitive enterprise, the faults of agent can hardly be matched with the blatantly negligent approach that explains failures in workable epistemic inquire (as Cassam's describes the Iraq fiasco). Again, it is relevant not to lose sight of the moderate challenge that acquisition of political knowledge represents. Political knowledge as epistemic

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<sup>45</sup> «It might help to note that intellectual goals can be theoretical (e.g., understanding string theory) or practical (e.g., understanding the boss's perspective), and trivial (e.g., knowing the era's of every pitcher in major league baseball) or important (e.g., knowing the history of the women's rights movement). They can be easy to achieve (e.g. solving  $26 \times 57$ ) or perennially challenging (e.g. proving Goldbach's conjecture)» (Battaly 2017: 671).

empowerment represents a cognitive enterprise that has an accessible degree of difficulty.

### *Epistemic Insouciance*

Threshold of culpable political ignorance corresponds with a specific kind of epistemic vice which Cassam defines as “epistemic insouciance”. Normatively, democratic demos must avoid being politically epistemic insouciant.

Insouciance in the ordinary sense is a casual lack of concern, carelessness, or indifference. The particular form of insouciance to which some politicians are prone is epistemic insouciance: a casual lack of concern about the facts or an indifference to whether their political beliefs and statements have any basis in reality. Epistemic insouciance means not really caring much about any of this and being excessively casual and nonchalant about the challenge of finding answers to complex questions, partly as a result of a tendency to view such questions as less complex than they really are. Epistemic insouciance means not giving a shit. It means viewing the need to find evidence in support of one’s views as a mere inconvenience, as something that is not to be taken too seriously. Finding accurate answers to complex questions can be hard work, and epistemic insouciance makes that hard work seem unnecessary. (Cassam 2018: 2)

Cassam clarifies the concept of “epistemic insouciance” by commenting misinformation of certain political leaders during Brexit campaign.<sup>46</sup> Insouciance refers to a negligent indifference towards one’s own epistemic tasks, which are fulfilled with nonchalance and disinterest. Tellingly, Cassam mentions the presence of complex questions which reconnects the analysis of the epistemic insouciance to the complexity of contemporary politics discussed above. In this regard, culpability of political ignorance is not represented by the failure to acquire relevant information about

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<sup>46</sup> See chapter 4 of Cassam (2019). These politicians showed insouciance in minimizing the intricacy implied by deciding about the future relationship between UK and EU. They took stance insouciantly: disregarding objections and evidence, avoiding taking the matter seriously.

complex (and therefore difficult) issues, but rather by the resistance to considering epistemic work unnecessary in the face of such complexity.

Cassam's characterization of insouciance recalls, as the author himself admits (Cassam 2018: 3), the famous analysis of "bullshit" provided by Henry Frankfurt (Frankfurt 2005). Agents prone to bullshitting/epistemic insouciance neglects the search for the truth in taking stance and expressing positions. In other words, these agents assume a "posture" which disregards the necessity to ground beliefs. Insouciant inquirers skip preparatory work and jump to conclusions. Facts, reliable sources, trustworthy opinions, first-hand experience, and concern for both sides of the tale are not contemplated by epistemic insouciant agents in their opinion-making. «The truly insouciant not only don't care about the facts or the evidence, they also don't care that they don't care» (Cassam 2019: 175). Such agents understand inquiry as providing opinions, and shrug or mumble if asked to justify them. Epistemic insouciance is a kind of "posture".

Epistemic insouciance is a posture towards truth, evidence or inquiry, a posture that is manifested by one's epistemic conduct. It implies, and is partly constituted by, a marked lack of intellectual seriousness, and flippancy about basing one's views on expert opinion or what the evidence shows. It is a casualness or indifference to the truth and to the need to base one's opinions on the relevant facts. Epistemic insouciance is not usually a matter of decision or choice and is in this sense involuntary. (Cassam 2018: 5)

As a "posture", epistemic insouciance is involuntary in the sense that it embodies the crystallization of agent's habits and prejudices. However, differently from insomnia case, insouciance betrays a cognitive inclination which is not beyond the control of the agent. In this regard, insouciant agents are responsible to the extent that they are able to shape their beliefs. To make the point clear, Cassam insists on the notions of "acquisition" and "revision responsibility" (Cassam 2019: 124-5). Except in extreme circumstances (Cassam gives the example of a Taliban recruit), people can control their beliefs: they can decide what to belief, have the epistemic power to change their mind

and can also refine their way of thinking. For instance, people tend to suffer – particularly in politics – from wishful thinking. Even admitting that everyone is naturally vulnerable to biases and illusion, ordinary people still have the faculty to educate their approach to problems and opinions to “adjust” their view over world (Cassam 2019: 139). Citizens have the responsibility to take care of their own epistemic posture because they have control on it. Of course, control over beliefs differs from that exercised on the arm when one raises hand. Rather, control at stake is more like the control one has on believing that heavy traffic extends the travel time to reach the airport or decide the layout of the furniture in the study. Literature identified three different kinds of control. These are, respectively, voluntary control (raise your hand), evaluative control (assessing the travel time to the airport) and managerial control (deciding the furniture of the studio) (Adams 1985: 8; Hieronymi 2006: 53; Cassam 2019: 125-135). Control over beliefs is first and foremost evaluative control, but other forms of control can play a part in laying the ground for fruitful epistemic inquiry. Blameworthy political ignorance is a form of epistemic insouciance. Blameworthiness stems from agent’s responsibility in not controlling its epistemic posture while forming beliefs.

### *Blameworthy Political Ignorance as Epistemic Insouciance*

In politics, epistemic insouciance represents a blame precisely because it is under agents’ control. People are blameworthy not to exercise control over their “posture” in facing public issues. What makes an action culpable, as seen, is motivation not to use one’s own power to control the action in a way or another. In case of political participation, politically ignorant citizens might decide to participate in an informed manner by asking, for example, trusted and competent people what position to take (Brennan 2011a: 76; Moraro 2018). This conduct could encourage criticism but is not



necessarily blameworthy.<sup>47</sup> In fact, by relying on someone else’s assessment, citizens recognize the need for an epistemic burden connected with political action. In this sense, they recognize the need to acquire political knowledge and adopt a strategy that is reasonable in form even if it is often not proportionate in its execution.<sup>48</sup>

Epistemic insouciance sets the bar for the normative level of political knowledge. Demos is expected to evade political ignorance of the rules of the game, cruxes of public debate and political actors. Concerning the threshold of political ignorance, people must avoid being epistemically insouciant on these issues. Such a demand evokes a modest level of political knowledge and, returning to metaphorical kinds of democratic citizens, can be summed up by asking the demos to be nothing more than “Muggles”. This category of citizens is far from the amazing talents and industrious dedication of the Vulcans. It does not take much to be a Muggle and avoid epistemic insouciance (about politics). The name itself, as clarified, alludes precisely to the ability to obtain satisfactory results without however possessing magical powers. In

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<sup>47</sup> There is a subtle difference between blameworthiness and criticism: intellectual judgements might raise criticism, but they are not necessarily blameworthy. More generally, this is true for every kind of actions. For instance, in 2019 Joe Biden addressed criticisms about his inclination to “touch” people during his campaigns. Critics read that inclination as inappropriate, especially in touching women. Many women accused the former Vice-president to make them uncomfortable with his behavior. Biden explained that such attitude is rooted in his will to encourage people and make “human connection” with them. He remarked his deep respect for women and emphasized the wide numbers of positive declarations of female politicians supporting his reconstruction. However, Biden accepted criticisms, acknowledging that social norms are changing and is comprehensible that someone might feel embarrassment by his conduct. Accordingly, he promised to be more mindful and respectful of physical space. In short, Biden accepted criticism about his attitudes but rejected to be blameworthy of promoting behaviors aimed at degrading women. The difference between criticism and blame in epistemic conduct emerges in Driver (2000).

<sup>48</sup> Chapter 4 will address possible institutional remedies to the problem of political ignorance. One of these, the “visible hand”, will reflect precisely on the possibility of referring to simple and reliable information provided by experts to overcome insouciance and take a position in the political process (see chapter 4, section 3).

other words, muggle-citizens overcome certain obstacles that get in way of political knowledge and, importantly, obstacles under consideration are suitable for all and “no-sweat” for many.

The threshold of tolerable ignorance must therefore reflect the epistemic commitment to acquire fundamental information in the three spheres of knowledge identified above (rules of the game, cruxes of public debate, political actors). Failure in such a cognitive enterprise is possible, but it becomes excusable in the face of a proportional epistemic effort. The point is clearly illustrated by Vanderheiden. «Only ignorance of moral or empirical facts, where persons make sufficient efforts to obtain those facts but remain ignorant of them, and not ignorance about their existence of the kind that would prevent such efforts from being initiated, can excused ignorantly-caused harm» (Vanderheiden 2016: 305).

Borrowing from a concept developed by Battaly, satisfying level of political knowledge requires a moderate amount of “intellectual perseverance” (IP), that is, commitment in trying to achieve epistemic goals. Very clearly, Battaly points out, such a virtue does not require big challenges, rather it manifests itself for affordable if not ordinary businesses. When demanding obstacles came, “intellectual perseverance” might not be enough to success. However, in such scenario, we are far beyond the threshold of overcoming insouciance and, therefore, citizens’ failure in difficult decisions is excused.

First, the trait of IP does not require success in overcoming extremely difficult obstacles. In cases where obstacles are extremely challenging, one can manifest IP by trying, albeit failing, to overcome them – by performing intellectual actions in an effort to overcome them. But, let’s set these cases aside, and focus instead on obstacles which are not that difficult to overcome, e.g. the temptation to watch television instead of doing one’s homework. Presumably, millions of students succeed in overcoming this temptation on a regular basis. Arguably, IP does require success in overcoming obstacles like these. (Battaly 2017: 674)

The threshold of political knowledge which has been identified requires success in overcoming simple obstacles, namely, in overcoming the “epistemic insouciance” towards public issues. Applying Vanderheiden’s notion of tolerable ignorance to the case of political knowledge, we could reiterate that «[i]t would not be reasonable to expect all citizens to possess the knowledge held by a specialist in some area, or to devote as much time to learning about that area as someone with an economic or professional stake» (Vanderheiden 2016: 305).

As mentioned above, to imagine a renewal of democratic practice starting from encouraging hobbits and hooligans to become muggles is anything but minimal. That would lead to a tangible change in democratic framework as ordinary people would accept the need to connect their role as political decision-makers to the scruple of understanding, verifying, deepening the issues on which they are called to decide. This, concretely, would entail a more demanding role for citizens, consistent with the democratic promise to give political power into their hands (on this aspect we will return several times in chapters 3 and 4). Furthermore, the possibility that ignorance persists after one engages with political information encourages a reassessment of the failures of the democratic people in a non-instrumental way, uncoupling expectations about the role of the demos from their performance (see chapter 3, section 2). As Tanesini well summarized, epistemic failure in the absence of “epistemic insouciance” is a reason for admiration. «We do admire people who apply themselves in the pursuit of intellectual inquiry, and our appreciation of them is not wholly dependent on the success of their endeavour» (Tanesini 2018: 358).

To conclude, let’s consider a very simple objection. One might object that, while know-nothings citizens (Brennan’s hobbits) are fully insouciant towards politics, extremist militant are not (Brennan’s hooligans). As said in chapter 1 (see second section), irrational political fans are mobilized by the politics’ calling and do not remain indifferent to the importance of public decisions. Contrary to indifference, they take stance and battle for supporting their ideas. Accordingly, politically irrational citizens would already satisfy our threshold. However, beyond a first glance, political hooligans

are *systematically* and *methodologically* insouciant about what they do not like. The fanaticism of these citizens leads them to assume a cognitive attitude that implies adversity towards truths that are inconvenient to accept. As Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon have shown, the epistemic attitude of strongly partisan individuals implies the alarming difficulty that facts don't "speak for themselves" (2008).<sup>49</sup> Their views are not based on facts or information but on stubborn support for a particular political party. Political hooligans are insouciant in that they lack seriousness and rigor in addressing the episteme in political decision-making.

#### **4. Political Ignorance, Immorality and Disagreement**

##### *Is Immorality a Form of Political Ignorance?*

Still a question nag about the notion of political knowledge. Even avoiding epistemic insouciance, people can however participate and vote according to perverse moral standards like racism, sexism, social injustice.<sup>50</sup> Can supporters of racism, sexism, social injustice be defined as *politically ignorant*? More generally, are immoral preferences seal of political ignorance?

At first glance, there are intuitive reasons to answer affirmatively. In fact, one might assert that moral expertise does exist and that there are no persuasive arguments in

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<sup>49</sup> «Today, however, pessimistic speculation seems to be backed up by the hard fact of partisan and ideological divisions over factual matters—about which, of necessity, one (or both) “sides” must be mistaken. [...] When partisan disagreements about important factual issues show that large subsets of the public are necessarily wrong about the facts, then there is clearly cause for concern about the political preferences that people base on their views of the facts—regardless of which preferences, and which perceptions of the facts, are held by a given observer» (Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon 2008: 131).

<sup>50</sup> Social injustice is here understood as the support for policies aimed at maintaining the socio-economic inferiority of some social strata. As with sexism and racism, the point of this political preference is determination to stymie equality between individuals.

favor of racism, sexism or perpetuation of social injustice defended by moral theories and their theorists (Singer 1972; Macniven 2002; Gordon 2014). To put another way, such positions would be morally unjustified since moral expertise exists and there is consensus among moral experts in disapproving them. Consequently, citizens with such preferences would be ignorant to the extent that they are indifferent, if not openly opposed, to moral “truths” concerning human nature and the coexistence of human beings. Their moral ignorance, in turn, would lead them to harbor misconceptions about the principles that must shape the political community and to defend false beliefs about the policies to be adopted. In this sense, racism, sexism, and moral injustice are signs of political ignorance. Such position is made even stronger in democratic order, where equality and autonomy among human beings is assumed as moral ground of popular sovereignty (Dahl 1989; Christiano 2008). Democracy demands that persons acknowledge themselves with each other as worth of mutual respect (Ottonelli 2008; Galeotti 2010). Advocates of racism, sexism, and social injustice do not grasp the moral presupposes of giving every citizen the power to participate in public decision-making. In this light, they *ignore* the core of democratic life and the dignity it recognizes to the whole demos.

There are, however, two reasons for rejecting an inclusive definition of political knowledge, namely, an idea of episteme that includes some degree of moral understanding. The first, more obvious, derives from the attempt to follow the epistocratic critique of democracy and evaluate how the arguments of the epistocrats can contribute to the theme of democracy and ignorance/political knowledge. The second, more important, reason will be outlined in the next section. Epistocrats develop their critique of democracy on a purely cognitive basis, observing that people ignore the fundamental facts of democratic process. The point they try to develop is purely epistemic, not moral: the epistocrats’ problem with democracy is not that many people are evil, but that they don’t know the stakes of political decision-making (see first and second section of this chapter).

Epistemic circumstances appear as strongly preeminent in epistocratic cause. In fact, “knowers” imagined by those theorists stand out firstly (in some cases exclusively) for their factual knowledge in fields connected to political decision-making. Moral virtue is never presented by the epistocrats as the answer to political ignorance, rather, what they require is a robust epistemic empowerment to cope with the intricacies of political decision-making. Otherwise, morally virtuous people run the risks to make harmful choices in the honest attempt to help others.

Let us consider two cases of political knowledge outlined by epistocratic theorists. López-Guerra envisions an institutional process aimed at imparting political knowledge to voters. Such a process would be «carefully designed to optimize their knowledge about the alternatives of the ballot» (López-Guerra 2014: 4). Political knowledge would therefore be the discovery of the various electoral programs, their possible repercussions, the ideological positions of the candidates. Returning to the analysis of the content of political knowledge proposed above, López-Guerra seems to focus on the third sphere of political knowledge identified: that concerning the actors on the political scene. The moral ideas of citizens would certainly be solicited by an empowerment of this kind which, in any case, would concern the factual elements of what the candidates undertake to do. By the same token, Brennan focuses on factual information to imagine a hypothetical test for enfranchisement. «The United States, for example, might use the questions on the ANES. Alternatively, the United States might require citizens to pass the citizenship exam, or score a three or higher on the Advanced Placement economics and political science exams» (Brennan 2016: 212). Even more explicitly, Brennan delineates political knowledge as awareness of facts of politics or, even more generally, knowledge of central disciplines in political reasoning (such as economics). In the reconstruction of the epistocrats, the moral convictions of individuals are not superfluous in the evaluation of public decisions, on the contrary, they constitute a cardinal element which, in fact, must be kept separate from the episteme.

## *Foreground and Background Elements*

The inclusion of a certain level of moral competence in the concept of political knowledge is presented as intuitive and even captivating, as shown above (see previous section). As said, political deliberation cannot be reduced to a discussion of facts (Goodin 2003: 74). Rather, the moral beliefs of individuals often end up being the true compass in public decisions. This observation, however, overlooks that public decisions are composed precisely of the interpenetration of factual factors with moral elements. Consider an example originally provided by Fuller (2019). Suppose we are deciding with our family where we should spend our vacation. Several aspects come into play in the decision; among others, we consider preferences on the place to visit, budget to spend, and relationships between family members. Fuller uses this example to argue that decisions involve questions of both power and knowledge. To put it differently, decision-making of any sort conflates foreground elements with background elements, moral factors with epistemic aspects. What counts as foreground elements is not just a matter of information. Rather, such preferences depend first on the moral preferences of the persons but also on temperament and personal experiences of individuals. In the vacation analogy, gratitude/hostility to another person or a personal preference for a certain place define the foreground elements. In politics, foreground elements determine the inclination to tend in a conservative rather than progressive direction (or the opposite), have more confidence in the state than in the free market (or the opposite), or be more or less inclined to environmentalism.<sup>51</sup> In

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<sup>51</sup> The process that leads to the formation of certain preferences is certainly conditioned by what persons “know”, that is, by epistemic data. However, although knowledge is a powerful conditioning, some fundamental positions that individuals take, for example the choice to be conservative, are the result of what they have known, loved, seen, suffered. In itself, it would be absurd to argue that the epistemic datum alone determines people’s orientations. As Arvan pointed out, a “monumentally costly” cognitive process would be required to overcome some basic moral beliefs and, even if such effort happens, behavioral attitudes might still jeopardize this revision process (2011: 3-4). There is

Fuller terms, foreground elements are about power as they incorporate the set of values and preferences that decision-makers struggle to advocate.<sup>52</sup> In contrast, background elements embody that side of decision-making where actors become involved and operate as epistemic agents. In Fuller's example, family members act as epistemic agent in calculating the possible budget for the vacation, the time when everyone can leave together, the accommodations that are the best fit for family's necessities, and so on. According to Fuller's reading, background elements identify knowledge – or episteme – in decision-making, that is, the cognitive aspects composing the informational terrain on which decision-maker operates.

In democratic decision-making, as also in the example of the holidays proposed by Fuller, episteme revolves around facts. Arendt reflected on the relation between politics and factual truth, stressing that the latter is «political by nature» (Arendt 2006: 238). «Freedom of opinion is a farce unless factual information is guaranteed and the facts themselves are not in dispute. In other words, factual truth informs political thought just as rational truth informs philosophical speculation» (Arendt 2006: 238). Political discussion and pondering are fed by knowledge of the facts of a reality upon which politics intervenes. Here, Arendt is not asserting that politics only concerns factual problems. In contrast, in politics, values and conceptions of justice clash; however, the clash of views takes facts as bricks for constructing disagreement. For instance, we might have different opinions about WWI; nonetheless, as Arendt remarked, we cannot disregard some shared facts, for instance, that in August 1914 Germany invaded Belgium (Arendt 2006: 240). Moreover, the epistemic side of political decision-

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an area in the identity of citizens that political knowledge, understood as knowledge of political facts, can influence but not reshape.

<sup>52</sup> We recall that the concept of political knowledge that is outlined in these pages is inspired by the criticism that the epistocracy makes of democracy and, consequently, follows the conception of episteme as factual knowledge that the epistocrats assume. Consequently, the moral and reflective capacity to justify one's own interests described, for example, by Stoker (1992) does not fall within the notion of “political knowledge” discussed here.



making is founded on modest but key information about the democratic environment wherein citizens act as political decision-makers. Rapeli analyzes the empirical literature on political knowledge to systematize four degrees of episteme in politics: knowledge, sophistication, awareness, and internal efficacy (Rapeli 2014: 16). The first and most elementary level of episteme is embodied exactly by political knowledge, as seen, a general familiarity with 1) the game rules (e.g., separation of powers), 2) substance of politics (e.g., major domestic and international issues of public debate), and 3) people and parties (e.g., the promises, performances, and attributes of candidates and political parties) (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996: 14). Naturally, this general knowledge cannot guarantee a sophisticated understanding of politics. As Sartori noted, information does not imply knowledge, but knowledge presumes information (Sartori 1987: 117-8). Nonetheless, political knowledge represents the basis for more meaningful evaluation, comprehension, and action in the political arena. Again, the modest empowerment of political knowledge revolves around the three theses discussed above: rules, cruxes, and actors (see section 2).

All in all, decision-making consists in squaring information with individual preferences, principles, and commitments. By itself, episteme cannot indicate how we should act; instead, it defines the wiggle room available for deliberation by making clear the conditions and implications connected to certain choices. In the travel example, if the available budget is known, it can be decided whether the trip should entail camping for a week or spending a weekend in a four-star hotel. Knowledge of the background elements makes it clear that, for instance, intercontinental journeys would be out of reach but would keep a series of solutions viable. Accordingly, it is up to decision-makers to confront with both the power and episteme to identify the answers to the question they are facing. As in the vacation analogy, supporting a position in political domain or even forming a political worldview as political decision-makers one needs to know certain facts and key information. Simply put, the epistemic side of political decision-making amasses basic but indicative truths on the matters to be decided through democratic procedures. Nonetheless, episteme alone cannot

provide a conclusion to political decision-making, because background knowledge must find its role within the broader scope of deliberation in the foreground that comprises individual preferences and moral beliefs. Rather, episteme confines the possible choices to a range of solutions and guide the evaluation of proposals and implementation of the decisions made. For instance, if one supports providing additional aid to immigrants and opposes their demonization based on personal experience in volunteer work (foreground elements), then awareness regarding the positions of presidential candidates will be fundamental to take a stand consistent with that preference (background elements).

From an analytical point of view, the politically ignorant citizen must therefore be distinguished from the politically evil ones. Of course, in reality the two tendencies often go hand in hand, but this cannot lead to assimilating the two different concepts. Morality is the most important foreground element people have when making decisions and represents a separate domain from episteme. Political knowledge as episteme on which epistocrats dwell, illuminates the basic aspects on which decisions are made, but does not eliminate the possibility of participating in politics in an immoral way. It can happen, and often does, that the most politically informed citizens are also the morally vilest. This sounds like proof that the episteme alone is a powerful but neutral means that – to introduce the analysis of the next section – does not eliminate the dilemma of how to use it.

### *Aristotle's "Epistemic Dilemma"*

Political knowledge can coexist without difficulty with depraved moral ideas, such as racism, sexism, indifference towards social inequalities. The possession of the episteme (that is, of a knowledge of the background elements of politics) does not necessarily go hand in hand with the possession of an enlightened moral knowledge (or foreground elements). The two elements remain distinct, although constantly in

communication. Without factual knowledge, political decision-making is blind, but without morality it is empty.

The epistemic effort required by political knowledge certainly guarantees a strong stimulus for the agent to review his own moral preferences. Many insightful intuitions might be developed against racism, sexism, and social injustice from multiple perspectives and, undoubtedly, familiarity with political staples provides a wide set of sparks to do that. In fact, racism and cognate positions often lay on deep misbeliefs and rough prejudices about social problems, political dynamics, and historical facts. Mills, for instance, argues that “white-supremacy” is a conceptual artifact based on «a cognitive model that precludes self-transparency and genuine understanding of social realities» (Mills 1999: 18). Nonetheless, political knowledge alone does not ensure that citizens retain their immoral preference (racism, sexism, moral injustice). People can show willingness to overcome insouciance, take facts and evidence seriously, consider them in their deliberation, but still be determined to support morally perverse preferences. Citizens like that cannot be labelled as hobbits for the obvious reason that they read up about political situation. Similarly, they are certainly not hooligans since they do not escape adverse arguments like hooligans do to keep steadfast their system of beliefs. On the contrary, these citizens engage in epistemic work and, thus, accept the burden of epistemic commitment demanded by the normative notion of “political knowledge” we outlined.

Brennan admits that ignorance is just one possible explanation of “bad voting” (we can generalize and say “bad political participation – whatever that could mean), which might be caused by three different reasons: 1) immoral beliefs; 2) ignorance; 3) epistemic irrationality and bias (Brennan 2009: 538). Political knowledge, as said, represents a strong tackle to 2) and 3), as well as providing intellectual tools for revising 1). In this reading, immorality resists knowledge more stubbornly than ignorance and biases because it depends more largely on extra-epistemic phenomena. Shortly, immorality in taking political decisions can survive political knowledge even if exhaustive knowledge on that matter is achieved, since other “forces” are at work here.

An interesting case of how political knowledge clearly emerges as a distinct factor with respect to moral convictions is given by the analysis of wealth and democratic decision-making. Brennan insists that, statistically, white, rich, male citizens know better politics than black, poor, female portion of the demos (Brennan refers to the US electorate) (Brennan 2016: 133-4). Discussing this passage, Arlen and Rossi point out that Brennan is trying to justify the importance of possessing “epistemic goods” to be knowledgeable democratic decision-makers (Arlen and Rossi 2018: 5). This point is made clear by Allen’s discussion of Aristotle’s reflection on oligarchy. According to Allen, Aristotle would agree with Brennan in arguing that wealthy people have more means and opportunities to cultivate their virtues. They are more likely to possess those “epistemic goods” necessary to take enlightened political decisions. Nevertheless, according to Arlen, Aristotle pointed out that behind the wealth-virtue link lies an “epistemic dilemma”. «Aristotle encounters, however, an epistemic dilemma. He insists that wealth often tracks virtue because it enables necessary leisure time. He recognises, however, that wealth is never a perfect proxy for virtue. The epistemic dilemma lies in distinguishing virtuous uses of wealth from deviant ones» (Arlen 2019: 394).

Even assuming the plausible connection between wealth and political knowledge, the “epistemic dilemma” lies in distinguishing virtuous use of political knowledge from deviant ones. Political knowledge can in fact represent the mean to unscrupulously serve the personal interest. In this reading, politically informed citizens could use their epistemic goods to better figure out how to act to get what they claim. The choice of what to do with political knowledge does not depend on political knowledge itself, rather, it revolves around motivations citizens have. This is exactly what makes blind faith in certain privileged portions of the demos (in this case the rich) “dilemmatic” for Aristotle: they possess the “epistemic goods” to make enlightened choices for their community, but will they?

As the previous section tried to highlight, the episteme illuminates the background elements of political decisions. However, the moral preferences of individuals are

prominent elements that are influenced while remaining distinct from the knowledge acquired. Knowledge of politics alone does not dispel this “epistemic dilemma”. Rich elite could be motivated by lucid and ruthless desire for money to endorse policies which implies the increase of social injustice. Arlen and Rossi take this risk into account by considering how preferences of rich do not always overlap with the ones of large majority, as super-rich are more likely to oppose increased regulation of big businesses and oppose social welfare spending favored by the broader population. «But because such policy positions are also consistent with their material interests, it can be difficult to separate out epistemic from purely pecuniary motivations» (Arlen and Rossi 2018: 6). Much literature denounces the unscrupulous use of skills and resources by certain elites to build a system of inequality that increases their wealth and power.<sup>53</sup> Even more, what strongly links the economic elites to the question of political knowledge of the demos are the attempts of the former to muddy the waters of public debate in order to take advantage of the growing credibility of certain positions. From this perspective, the systematic ignorance affecting vulnerable social strata (but not only) is the result of sophisticated machinations of professional “merchants of doubts” at the service of powerful subjects and lobbies.<sup>54</sup> A striking case is the so-called “tobacco strategy” set up by the powerful lobby of cigarette manufacturers to hide the harmful effects of smoking from public opinion. The strategy consisted in producing a series of doubts with targeted arguments, so that the denial of risks from smoking, while not prevailing, was never completely discredited. The goal was to leave the

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<sup>53</sup> See, among others, Winter and Page (2009), Winter (2011) and Mayer (2016).

<sup>54</sup> «But surely, some blame for these epistemic shortcomings rests on the socioeconomic elites themselves, and the elaborate strategies at their disposal for moulding public opinion around hot-button issues like climate change and healthcare reform: campaign commercials, Super-PAC funded advocacy, professional spin-masters, and the like; spending which has only become more important in our polarised and corporatised media landscape». (Arlen and Rossi 2018: 7)

margin in the mind of the smokers to nourish skepticism about scientists' warnings and, consequently, to foster the reluctance to quit smoking. <sup>55</sup>

Analysis of political preferences aimed at perpetuating social injustice tried to clarify the possibility to be knowledgeable about politics despite supporting immoral policies and perverse strategies to support them. However, as highlighted above, political knowledge has a strong influence in preferences formation. The case of “merchants of doubt” confirms the intuition that knowledge about facts (or background element in political decision-making) plays crucial role in orienting the citizen within decision-making. It is noteworthy that the episteme is considered by opponents of the facts as a fearful resource which, if widespread, can change people's deliberation on individual and collective problems. Knowledge is thus a powerful force that affects the human will, without however determining it. The obvious interaction of episteme and morality in people's deliberation does not affect their reciprocal independence. This aspect is vital for developing a realistic understanding of what the episteme does and can do in the democratic context. In other words, it is crucial to grasp the significant but, in any case, limited incidence of knowledge of political facts on people's decisions. Recalling the words of Goethe's Pandora, political knowledge illuminates, but does not prevent error or immorality. In fact, even the politically knowledgeable individuals are thus destined to see the illuminated, not the light. <sup>56</sup>

## Conclusion

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<sup>55</sup> The action of “merchants of doubt” is analyzed by Oreskes and Conway. «The idea was [...] to “keep the controversy alive”. So long as there was doubt about the causal link, the tobacco industry would be safe from litigation and regulation» (Oreskes and Conway 2010: 5). «Call it the “Tobacco Strategy”. Its target science, and so it relied heavily on scientists – with guidance from industry lawyers and public relations experts – willing to hold the rifle and pull the trigger. Among the multitude of documents we found in writing this book were *Bad Science: A Resource Book* – a how-to handbook for *fact fighters*» [my emphasis] (Oreskes and Conway 2010: 6).

<sup>56</sup> Quoted by Adorno (1984).

Not knowing the president's prerogatives. Approaching the debate on unemployment or immigration by taking unreal data as facts. Attributing the merits or demerits of certain decisions to politicians who did not make them. These are just some of the implications of political ignorance on people's political participation. The chapter tried to characterize the littleness of citizenship advanced by epistocrats as ignorance of the facts of politics, divided in the course of the analysis into three distinct thematic fields. The episteme, therefore, embodies something that can be acquired and shared, which rarely raise disagreements and which, as we shall see, offers the resources to build one's position in the context of permanent disagreement.

Taken for granted a certain level of factual ignorance, the concept of epistemic insouciance allowed to set the threshold of blameworthy political ignorance. Political ignorance is a normative problem for democracy when it becomes insouciance. In these terms, the epistemic littleness of the people can be understood as a posture towards the truth, which the empirical data on people's ignorance capture without clarifying. By itself, of course, epistemic insouciance does not represent a quantitative criterion for establishing a certain degree of ignorance as tolerable or intolerable. Rather, it offers a perspective on the inability of democracy to create the aptitude in citizens to pour their cognitive capabilities in political decision-making.

The episteme as factual knowledge is achieved through a moderate commitment of citizenship and embodies for them a condition for getting into democratic procedure. This allows us to connect the proposed definition of political knowledge to the analysis of its function in the democratic paradigm and understand episteme as founding value of democratic process.

## Chapter 3

### Political Knowledge Within Democratic Framework

«Where truths are utterly free to be individually chosen, where the processes of inquiry are marginalized, the social disintegrates».

Daniel Rodgers

After exposing the problem of the epistemic littleness of the demos (chapter 1) and providing a definition of political ignorance/knowledge (chapter 2), this chapter aims to justify the interest in the political knowledge of citizenship, arguing that the role of episteme represents a recurring problem in reflection on the nature of the democratic process and its legitimacy. To this end, the investigation of epistocratic theorists constitutes a fundamental theoretical contribution. Indeed, epistocracy highlights how the centrality of the people in political process and the epistemic side of decision-making are both fundamental premises of democratic theory and practice. Starting from these assumptions, epistocratic scholars assimilate the epistemic disengagement of large part of the citizenship – their insouciance – to the impossibility of relying on the people as political decision-maker. It would be necessary, the epistocrats argue, to associate this unwillingness with the downsizing of their political role.

Contrary to what is argued by the epistocrats, this chapter outlines a radically different argument about the role of episteme within democratic framework. According to this reading, political knowledge is inserted into a procedural understanding of democracy, and episteme represents a value for democracy because it enlightens the factual elements involved in public choices. Democracy recognizes people as decision-makers at the light of their capacity to shape the fate of the community by comprehending the world, rather than act instinctually or randomly. Mastering a certain understanding of reality stands out humanity and makes “truths” about the world count, especially when



every individual is entitled to take political decisions. Here again, those “truths” shall be interpreted with modesty to be combinable with principles of proceduralism. In this light, following the analysis of Robert Dahl, the right way to place the problem of the episteme in the study of democracy is the defense of an “enlightened proceduralism”. Democracy constitutes an enlightened proceduralism in that it institutionalizes people’s capacity to comprehend their world and trusts everyone’s epistemic capacity to understand, deliberate and decide on collective problems.

The chapter is divided into four sections. The first section focuses on the epistocratic interpretation of the role of knowledge in the democratic process. Epistocrats argue that political ignorance reveals the reluctance of large part of the demos to accept the implications of decision-making and, with that, uncovers the betrayal of the inspiring values of the democratic ideal. Epistocracy assumes an instrumentalist understanding of democracy and the role of political knowledge, which is discussed in second session. From this point of view, democracy must be interpreted as a tool for arriving at right decisions, which can be known by knowledgeable people. For this reason, power is submitted to knowledge as the lodestar of public decisions. However, instrumentalism becomes possible if an “epistemic reductionism” is embraced, where political process is interpreted as a mere chain of cognitive problems and technical evaluations. Politics is thus reduced by instrumentalists to mere technique and an unlikely conception of episteme is assumed, where *right* ends and means of collective action are always clear and knowable. The third section considers the proceduralist perspective, which opposes instrumentalism, and understands democracy as a procedure that protects the equal freedom of citizens in a context of persistent disagreement on the decisions to be taken. This proceduralism tends to be anti-epistemic, to consider the appeal to knowledge as a Trojan horse, which would introduce the commitment to truth and epistemic accuracy into society and discriminate against less informed citizens by referring to criteria of objectivity. The fourth section aims to present the episteme as modest body of “serviceable truths” that enlightens the debate on public decisions without presenting the “smoking gun” on what is right to do. Democracy should thus be understood as an

enlightened procedure which, alongside the protection of equal freedom in a context of perennial disagreement, recognizes and enhances citizens' political and epistemic agency, that is, human ability to produce modest truths about the world and decide accordingly.

## **1. Political Knowledge and Epistocracy**

### *People's Centrality and Epistemic Side of Decision-Making*

Given that episteme as political knowledge embodies non-insouciance in acquiring information about rules of the game, cruxes of the public debate, and actors of democratic politics, still unclear is the role of political knowledge within democratic paradigm. Simply put, one might wonder what makes political ignorance relevant for democratic paradigm and ask why knowledge about facts of politics represents a goal to be pursued. In this regard, the reflection of the epistocrats provides a strong stimulus to consider and answer this question. More generally, as De Mucci's presentation of Brennan's *Against Democracy* points out, the epistocratic critical reflection on democracy based on the political ignorance of the people can be represented as the thunderous impact of a stone in the pond of normative political theory (De Mucci 2018: 28).

The epistocracy, in fact, bases its conclusions on the central role of democratic citizenship as a political decision-maker and, importantly, on the epistemic implications of such a role. In doing so, these two elements are highlighted as key presuppositions of democratic philosophy, that is, two conditions of possibility to be respected for democracy to exist. Political ignorance is therefore in the first place relevant to normative democratic theory precisely because it makes explicit and then challenges presuppositions of democratic decision-making.

Appealing to the "conditions" of democratic paradigm might foster a sociological and historical perspective over the problem of "little demos". In fact, throughout history,

the spread and consolidation of contemporary democracies coincided with achievements such as equality before the law, literacy, and the formation of a middle class. Although democracy does not represent for this a necessary and univocal outcome – the “end of history” – it is undoubtedly the “end of *a history*”, namely, the end of an era characterized by numerous civil and social achievements (Veca 1989: 567-70; Fukuyama 1992). Democratic organization of society is in this sense the result of specific progresses. One might say that democracy is allowed and encouraged by social and juridical developments which in turn can be interpreted as conditions of democratic practice.

Present investigation, however, does not embrace such line of inquiry. Instead of detecting external and “material” conditions for democracy, the analysis adopts a normative perspective to figure out the theoretical conditions posed by adopting democracy. Democracy is not a free lunch. Rather, democracy is linked to onerous and demanding commitments to make the government of the people possible and stable. In this second light, the study of people’s political ignorance is relevant because it portrays the epistemic posture of the demos as a peculiar field where normative expectations towards democracy arise. Brennan and other critics on the epistemic front highlight two normative expectations connected to the acceptance of democratic framework. First, democracy grounds on people’s centrality. Criticisms towards people’s political ignorance implicitly emphasize people’s role and weight in democratic process. Very shortly, popular involvement is the kernel of democratic ideal. Under representative democracy, everything begins with the expression of people’s will. The desires of the demos can surely be contained, mediated, even “reviewed” by their representatives, but the voice of the people always creates important consequences for decision-making. As Goodin brilliantly put it: «democracy is, in essence, a matter of people’s preferences» (Goodin 1993: 229). From this point of view, the “littleness” of the people in understanding politics is relevant because raise doubts about a possible short-circuit of democratic model, where the centrality of the people as decision-makers is accompanied by their inability to understand the problems

on which they are called to express their will. The cognitive littleness of the people is, as we shall see, the argument used by epistocratic critics to question the centrality of the people themselves and argue that the role of political decision-maker must necessarily correspond to an epistemic commitment.

Secondly, the description of “little demos” and the consequent critical perspective over democratic practice are salient for democratic theory since they spotlight people’s epistemic burden as an implicit and constitutive aspect of democratic practice itself. By the very fact of being the fulcrum of democratic self-government, people necessarily are forced to cope with epistemic aspects of public affairs. As seen, popular self-government, as whatever decision-making activity, entails an epistemic component for actors involved in that practice. Analysis of chapter two has urged the importance of recognizing both *foreground* and *background* elements within the process of decision-making. Focus on episteme remarks the salience of the latter. To decide on whatever, decision-makers are necessarily pushed by circumstances to make an epistemic effort, to figure out what is the matter on which deliberating, the possible choices they can make, and the implications on decisions finally taken. Under democratic regimes, such a gnoseological task is – although not exclusively – in the hands of the demos. As decision-makers, the people are necessarily also epistemic agents. This complementarity between the political and epistemic aspects is essential: the people are also, even if not exclusively, epistemic agents in approaching politics.

### *Epistocracy and Democratic Citizenship*

Jason Brennan, Bryan Caplan, Ilya Somin, Claudio López-Guerra, Daniel Bell, and Garrett Jones are leading scholars in the analysis of “little demos” and its consequences for democratic theory. Despite important differences among them, all these authors might be labelled as “epistocrats”. By epistocracy is meant a form of political decision-making where political power is formally or substantially in the hands of “knowers”. Epistocracy can be *de iure*: “knowers” would have more political power by force of

law (e.g., they alone can vote). Alternatively, epistocracy can be *de facto*, with “knowers” having more weight and decisive influence in running government (e.g., political recruitment among experts). Technocracy, for instance, is a declination of epistocracy, in which “specialists” (either bureaucrats or politicians, or even both) dominates decision-making by imposing an up-down approach to public issues.<sup>57</sup> Technocracy is often understood as a *de facto* epistocracy, as experts can achieve ruling positions which are *de iure* achievable to every citizen.<sup>58</sup>

Mentioned theorists directly endorse some kind of *de iure* epistocracy (Brennan, Bell, López-Guerra) or, at least, welcome radical reforms to tackle the impact of political ignorance by reducing people’s weight in decision-making process and realize a *de facto* epistocracy (Caplan, Somin, Jones). All these scholars intend to overcome or reshape democracy because political ignorance demonstrates the unreliability of the demos as both principal decision-maker and epistemic agent. In their view, the empirical data concerning public ignorance does not simply reveal the difficulty of achieving a citizen-driven system of government, but rather the impracticability or even the undesirability of such a normative project. By putting trust on the demos, democracy backs on the wrong horse. Epistocrats’ stigmatizing depiction of the demos emerges in several passages.

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<sup>57</sup> Note that technocracy have traits which some epistocrats might not endorse. Putnam, for instance, highlights some key figures of technocratic thought on which epistocrats might not agree, such as the priority of technological progress over social justice, the skepticism about pluralism or indifference towards moral/ideological disputes (Putnam 1977).

<sup>58</sup> *De iure* technocracy can be given as well. The proposal of an “upper chamber for ethics and science” by oncologist and former Minister of Health of Italy Umberto Veronesi points in that direction, as well as the creation of a “council of sages” advanced by the economist Giulio Sapelli (Bucchi 2009: 2). Castellani presents a division in democratic discussion which uncovers a *de facto* regime. On one side, the public is interested in discussing *politics*, focusing on leaders, campaigning, and ideologies. On the other side, high skilled technicians deal with *policies*, digging into practical aspects of political decisions (Castellani 2020: 18).

I think *most people are bad at politics* and politics is bad for most of us, yet I am not arguing that therefore we should have government do less (or more). Instead, I am arguing that – if the facts turn out the right way – *fewer of us should be allowed to participate*. (Brennan 2016: 19 – my emphasis)

In the naive public-interest view, democracy works because it does what voters want. In the view of most democracy skeptics, it fails because it does not do what voters want. In my view, *democracy fails because it does what voters want*. (Caplan 2007: 3 – my emphasis)

*Public knowledge levels fall well short of the requirements of normative theories of political participation*. This is probably not surprising in the case of highly demanding theories such as deliberative democracy. It is more noteworthy that the majority of the public do not even meet the requirements of relatively simple theories such as Schumpeterian retrospective voting. (Somin 2013: 60 – my emphasis)

Democracy is flawed because most *voters are incompetent*. In the jargon of contemporary political philosophy, *democracy is epistemically deficient*: more knowledgeable voters would make better decisions at the polls. [...] But isn't there room for improvement via institutional innovation? *Can't the franchise be restricted* in a morally acceptable way to produce a better electorate? (López-Guerra 2014: 23 – my emphasis)

The uncomfortable truth is that the best (perhaps only) way to reduce the political influence of *ignorant voters* is to *deprive them of the vote*. (Bell 2015: 30)

The push for “*one person, one vote*,” come what may, has had both benefits and costs, and in the twenty-first century we have enough data to make it clear that the *costs are pretty high*. The costs of giving equal weight to the informed and uninformed alike are high enough that it's worthwhile to look for creative ways to *tilt the scales just a little bit toward the informed*. (Jones 2020: 6 – my emphasis).

As mentioned earlier (see chapter 1, section 2), politically ignorant voters often abstain on election day. Consequently, they do not “pollute the polls”. So, if this is true, why are these “little citizens” a threat to democratic practice? This question might be

addressed by remarking two points. First, even if a correlation between political ignorance and abstention might be observed, not all politically ignorant citizens stay at home on election days. For this reason, Brennan wants to “institutionalize” abstention by preventing their vote by force of law. Moreover, political ignorance is perceived by epistocrats as the evidence that people centrality must be overcome. Therefore, to maintain a bottom-up form of political organization centered on demos’ participation, political power must be put in the hands of those individuals who accept epistemic responsibility implied by political decision-making. Brennan questions universal suffrage and endorses a restriction of the right to vote by arguing that large part of the demos establishes a bad relationship with politics and, if they participate, “pollute the polls” with their ignorance.<sup>59</sup> By the same token, Caplan denounces that people’s engagement is not the solution to political problems, engagement is the problem. Somin clearly underlines that demos falls short to satisfy even minimal epistemic requirement implied by political decision making and suggests a drastic reduction of government’s size and prerogatives together with a devolution of powers towards local politics.<sup>60</sup> López-Guerra reflects on the morality of electoral exclusions based on political ignorance and proposes arguments for the “enfranchisement lottery”, where only a tiny part of the electorate could win the right to vote after undergoing a “competence building process” led by experts. Daniel Bell argues that Western

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<sup>59</sup> Brennan considers different forms of epistocracy: 1) restricted suffrage (i.e. right to vote and run for office only if citizens prove their competence through an examination); 2) plural voting (additional votes for competent citizens); 3) epistocratic veto (competent citizens can join a council with the veto power over democratic elected assemblies); 4) weighted voting/government by simulated oracle (citizens’ votes are weighted based on their objective political knowledge) and finally 5) enfranchisement lottery (see López-Guerra’s citation and following explanations in this section). Even in different ways, all these arrangements share the same goal: to nullify or at least reduce the political weight of politically ignorant citizens in democratic decision-making.

<sup>60</sup> Somin’s epistocratic approach leads to anarchist proposals, as underlined by Brennan (2019). Somin derives from the problem of political ignorance not the need to reduce the weight of citizens in choosing the government but, more radically, to reduce the government.

democracies should cure people's ignorant influence by overcoming universal suffrage and combining technocratic meritocracy at the level of central government with democracy at local level. Finally, Jones argues that the democratic rate of contemporary democracies should be reduced with reforms that wrest power from the hands of ordinary (and ignorant) citizens and rely on insiders/specialists.

Endorsement to new forms of institutional arrangements is, so to speak, just the top of the iceberg of epistocratic political theory. Starting point of epistocratic reflection is a philosophical assessment of people's role and responsibility in political decision-making. From this perspective, epistocracy commits itself to develop a philosophy of citizenship which leverages on epistemic aspects of political decision-making to marginalize demos' bottom-up influence.

### *Between Knowledge and Power*

Epistocracy grounds its criticism towards democracy by understanding epistemic responsibilities of the demos as one of the "normative expectations" stemming from democratic ideal itself. From this perspective one might see in epistocratic approach to democratic theory as the attempt to verify whether real democracies are consistent with their theoretical model. In Platonic terms, the aim here would be measuring the closeness of "in the flesh" democracy to the "idea of democracy" and detecting the extent to which empirical flaws alienate democratic practice from its paradigm. To this aim, epistocrats stress the need to anchor criticism and possible defense of democratic practice to reality, and not just to "ideal theory".

None of us have any patience for romantic, pie-in-the-sky depictions of democracy or for the knee-jerk dogma that all the problems of democracy can be fixed with more democracy. All are concerned about real-world practical problems. We recognize you can't counter a complaint of the form 'These institutions have these problems' by responding, 'Oh, but if everyone behaved



the way my theory requires them to behave, those institutions would be fine.’ (Brennan 2019a: 1).<sup>61</sup>

The problem of the “little demos” partly concerns the need to adapt democratic practice to theory. However, there is more at stake here.<sup>62</sup> Epistocracy brings out the contradiction between the alleged centrality of the demos and its clear lack of knowledge even of the fundamental facts and staples of political affairs. It has been stressed several times that democracy, like any form of decision, implies power and knowledge, that is, it links the power to choose to the cognitive background of the context in which one chooses and the problems on which one chooses. Epistocrats denounce the reluctance of the democratic people to take on this second aspect. Democracy, in short, assumes that the demos accepts the epistemic burden associated with its role, but does not care that it does not. Why rely on people as decision-makers – and thus epistemic agent – if, they are not expected to be aware of the issues they deliberate and decide on? In fact, under democratic regime people are enfranchised and, thus, empowered to play a role with epistemic implications. Such entitlement assumes that people play that role but little or no attention is paid to the event they don’t.

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<sup>61</sup> Discussing Landemore’s *Democratic Reason*, Brennan reiterates the point. «However, while Landemore draws on a wide range of theoretical literature, in my view, the book does not succeed. A fortiori, critics of democracy will find little in her book to trouble them or give them pause. This is because she does not respond seriously to the concerns of critics of democracy. Untouched by their worries about real-world public ignorance and systematic error, she relies largely on a priori arguments for the smartness of democracy. Further, she often retreats to ideal theory in ways that render her work irrelevant as a response to epistocrats» (Brennan 2014: 34-5).

<sup>62</sup> The investigation does not intend to overlook the consistency between the democratic paradigm and democratic practice. In fact, the relationship between theory and practice will return in the concluding chapter, which will be devoted to exploring the repercussions of the present analysis on democratic institutions.

At this point, one might contest the validity of this contradiction by arguing that democratic paradigm did not assume the existence of politically knowledgeable people or, more generally, does not take for granted any kind of (epistemic) performance from the demos. Rather, democracy concerns power – not knowledge – and consists in giving everyone equal liberty in public decision-making. Accordingly, there is no contradiction between democratic creed and the low level of information demos possesses. Basically, as we shall see, this reply roughly summarizes the intuitions of democratic proceduralism. Epistocracy challenges a similar approach by insisting that democracy as a form of decision-making forces citizens to act as epistemic agents. As seen, decisions entail knowledge of the problems on which one must decide, no matter if that knowledge is advanced or elementary. Individuals might even decide at random, but the very fact that they are deciding means that they know they are producing consequences in specific fields: their work, their family, their free time. Democracy as decision-making has this epistemic side. As admitted above, tracking common decisions about how to live together is not exclusively a matter of knowledge and understanding. Nevertheless, knowledge and understanding are at stake.

To believe that the president can do anything, that the problem with unemployment is that half the population has no work, hating that politician for something decided by another are examples that testify to the reluctance of many people to be epistemic agents in democratic decision-making process. The problem is not that, being politically ignorant, they make bad decisions, but that they reject episteme as a structural feature of decision-making and, with that, the responsibilities that decision-makers have. Epistocratic theorists wonder why people should play such a central role as they are expected to understand (episteme) and decide (power) but are unwilling to do the first task. Is the centrality of people a wrong expectation, given the littleness of the demos – as the epistocrats argue?

## **2. Political Knowledge and Instrumentalism**

## *Knowledge Before Power*

Epistocratic doctrine represents the ideal perspective for reflecting on the role and function of episteme in democracy and, more broadly, in public decision-making. Even more, as we shall see, epistocrats are precious interlocutors since they bring the weight of knowledge in political decision-making to the extremes but, in doing this, make even clearer the reasonable concern for democracy's epistemic side.

As seen above, epistocracy spotlights the inability of democracy to be true to itself, to recognize all the implications of placing the people at the center of political decision-making. Epistocratic perspective discloses that the demos must be understood to be also an epistemic agent and, accordingly, adult faith in democracy must consider epistemic responsibilities on demos' shoulders or, alternatively, reconcile the epistemic littleness of the demos with a new distribution of political power.

In epistocratic institutional design, epistemic concerns lead to endorse reforms aimed at placing political responsibility in the hands of knowledgeable individuals. Decision-making as epistemic practice is so put in hands of epistemically committed persons. Attention to political knowledge paid by epistocrats opens the doors to impacting devices such as disenfranchisement (Brennan, López-Guerra, Bell), drastic reduction of political power's prerogatives (Somin), technocracy and robust empowerment of "beltway insiders" (Jones, Bell), voting license (Brennan, Caplan). Under this light, epistocratic paradigm goes a step further than simply valorizing the role of episteme in political decision making. In this reading, decision-making has not just an epistemic side, rather it is seen first and foremost as epistemic practice. What matters is translating *episteme* into *kratos*, that is, knowledge into decisions.

Epistocrats concentrate on how power works and which are the outcomes given. Results of political process are in fact understood by epistocrats as the terrain where preeminence of knowledge in political domain must be recognized and seen. Good decisions are the consequence of proper understanding of reality and positive outcomes are the confirmation that translation of knowledge into power is happening.

One might argue that, just by observing history, epistocracy can be easily contested: educated elites have long exploit their ruling position for realizing what was good *for them*. The very fact that *good* in politics is something debatable seems to disqualify mere knowledge as criteria of distributing political power and orienting political action. However, in facing this objection one should consider that epistocracy at issue presents itself as the evolution of democracy, based on the downsizing of the demos and the development of the social sciences. Recalling the “end of history” mentioned in previous section, epistocrats do not question that liberal democracy has been the valuable tool for achieving great outcomes for humanity: political and social rights, economic growth, peace (especially among democracies) (Donnelly 1999; M. Bell and Quek 2018). Epistocracy is not willing to deny the detrimental effects of past social arrangements, where few and privileged circles have determined the destiny of all according to their interest. Rather, epistocracy is meant to criticize democracy today, developing criticisms towards democracy at the light of the democratic breakthrough and wondering whether world be better place with less democracy.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Epistocracy might be seen as the reflection about establishing the suited democratic rate, as suggested by Arneson’s instrumental approach. «The optimal degree of democracy for a given society is that extent of democracy having which produces consequences morally better than those that having any other level of democracy in place would produce» (Arneson 2009: 198). On the link between epistocracy and instrumentalism will return in a moment. This point of reducing (and not zeroing) democratic rate is expressed very clearly by Jones through the notion of “Laffer curve”. In economics, Laffer curve describes the theoretical relationship between tax rates and tax revenue and is represented graphically as an upside-down U. This representation reflects that tax revenue grows as tax rates grow. However, across the peak of the upside-down U, things change, and higher taxation leads to less revenue. According to Jones, the same goes with democracy today: rich democracies have crossed this peak. To improve their policies, to find their own sweet spot, they should cut their “democratic rate” by about 10%. In this sense, epistocracy overlaps to democracy, modify the framework, without upsetting it. «At low levels of democracy, a bit more democracy predicted noticeably higher growth rates. Yet after a certain point, higher levels of democracy predicted noticeably slower growth rates. [...] Would you be willing to support longer terms for politicians,

With a metaphor, epistocracy interprets democracy as the ladder envisioned by Wittgenstein, which can be safely thrown away once one has climbed its steps. Democracy, quite simply, is a means, an instrument, to better understand some ends to achieve and the way to achieve them. As such, democracy could cease to be necessary and end up being thrown away to, as Wittgenstein wrote, «see the world aright» (Wittgenstein 2001: 89). Nowadays world, epistocrats affirm, demands a clear preeminence of knowledge in political decision-making to go up a floor and see things from the right perspective.

### *Epistocracy and Instrumentalism*

Epistocracy presents itself as the ladder needed today, with people, even if educated, failing to keep up with an increasingly technocratic politics, a schizophrenic public debate, and an overwhelming flow of information. Social complexity is trampling citizens' amateurism and the emphasis posed by epistocrats on the weight of episteme in decision process encourages to trust expertise as the resource to figure out problems, single out options, be aware and realist in trusting candidates.

Epistocratic approach to politics fosters an “instrumental” assessment of political institutions and, more broadly, of politics overall. Political system is geared to achieving specific outcomes and knowledge allows to make political process functional to that end. Emphasis on such instrumental interpretation and the consequent “outcome-centered” view is clearly exposed by Brennan.

I will argue that democracy's value is purely instrumental; the only reason to favor democracy over any other political system is that it is more effective at producing just results, according to procedure-independent standards of justice. Democracy is nothing more than a hammer. If we

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tightened voter eligibility, and a single, hegemonic political party in exchange for a 300% raise? Well, you might not, but a lot of your neighbors probably would» (Jones 2020: 19-20).

can find a better hammer, we should use it. Later in the book, I will provide some evidence that we might be able to build a better hammer than democracy. (Brennan 2016: 11) <sup>64</sup>

Brennan strongly champions an outcome-oriented understanding of political arrangements and support epistemic centrality typical of epistocratic regimes as the key to grasp and realize the “independent standard of justice”. Episteme is lodestar not only to be sure about the ends to realize but, further, about the means to adopt to get them. If so, reasonable support must be offered to the political arrangement most fit to provide desired achievements – nothings else matters.

My view is that when choosing between any form of democracy or any form of epistocracy, we should pick the system which all-things-considered produces the best overall outcomes as judged by the correct procedure-independent normative theory, whatever that is, including whatever trade-offs the correct normative theory says we ought to make among stability, distributive justice, Pareto-efficiency, economic growth, liberal rights, and so on. (Brennan 2019: 7)

Brennan remarks his inflexible instrumentalism in several passages and makes the link between epistocracy and political outcomes clear. <sup>65</sup> Other scholars are less explicit or,

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<sup>64</sup> Instrumental account of democracy is well summarized by Arneson. «My position is that democracy, when it is just, is so entirely in virtue of the tendency of democratic institutions and practices to produce outcomes that are just according to standards that are conceptually independent of the standards that define the democratic ideal. Democracy, in other words, should be regarded as a tool or instrument that is to be valued not for its own sake but entirely for what results from having it». (Arneson 2004: 42)

<sup>65</sup> In discussing Arlen and Rossi’s replies to his epistocratic argument, Brennan bites the bullet on several implications of instrumentalism. «I’m an instrumentalist. If it turned out that making Rossi dictator for life, or using a Ouiji board, or installing the American Communist Party in a monopoly produced the best all-things-considered outcomes as judged by the correct normative theory, whatever that is, I’d accept them. The reason I oppose these things isn’t because they are in principle evil but because they don’t work» (Brennan 2019a: 10). Brennan’s echoes instrumental positions assertively

embrace nuanced position in relation to their conception of democracy and politics. López-Guerra, for instance, distances himself from a mere instrumentalist logic by arguing that epistocracy can be defended with a “problem-driven” approach which integrates both instrumental and procedural concerns (López-Guerra 2014: 11-3, 18-21). However, despite this premise, López-Guerra’s justification of “disenfranchisement lottery” (the form of epistocracy he endorses) does not seem to fall far from the instrumentalism’s three. Indeed, the Mexican scholar openly goals to desacralize some opinions that prevent citizens from a lucid analysis of the pros and cons of universal suffrage. Again, the rationales evoked by López-Guerra rhymes with getting good outcomes typical of instrumental perspective.

According to the conventional view – prevalent in most political debates, academic writings, and legal thinking on the matters – voting is a basic right, and current controversies about disenfranchisement should be seen as explorations into its limits. From this perspective, any denial of the franchise is a *prima facie* violation of fundamental right. Alternatively, we could approach disenfranchisement as a problem of institutional design. On this view, the choice between of the different compositions of the electorate would be treated in the same way as we normally treat the choice between, for instance, presidentialism and parliamentarism. (López-Guerra 2014: 14)

López-Guerra follows the second way. Overcoming democracy is just a matter of institutions’ design, not a matter of principle. Matters of principle have been already answered by theorizing political knowledge as primary landmark of political decision-making aimed at reaching good results. Universal suffrage and, thus, fundamental structure of democracy should be revised in favor of more epistemically “high-

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argued by Richard Arneson (2003, 2004, 2009). «The choice between autocracy and democracy should be decided according to the standard of best results. Which political system best promotes the common good over the long run? [...] In some possible worlds, probably some past states of the actual world, and possibly in some future actual scenarios, autocracy wins by the best results test and should be installed. Democracy is extrinsically not intrinsically just» (Arneson 2004: 41).

performance” arrangements and thus, as López-Guerra states: «the point of my lottery system is precisely to *replace the judgement of all with something better*» (López-Guerra 2014: 26, my emphasis)<sup>66</sup>. Contrary to the theoretical dissociation professed above, López-Guerra ends up aligning with instrumental epistocracy, supporting that 1) politics is about getting good outcomes; 2) the way to obtain good outcomes is “better judgement” of decision-makers (epistemic factor is thus crucial); 3) epistocratic arrangement is necessary.

In her critical reconstruction of epistemic view of democracy, Hill spotlights these points as key figure of epistocratic (“epistemic” in her text) framework. Father of this political theory, Hill argues, is Plato.

Like the epistemic democrats who came after him, Plato believed that there exists: (a) an identifiable common good; (b) objectively ‘correct’ political decisions that can be arrived at through the deliberations of the wise few; and (c) the possibility of eradicating partiality and personal interests and conflicts. (Hill 2016: 4)

The faith put in placing knowledgeable individuals at the helm – Hill’s (b) – and the hope to downsize disagreement by centering political deliberation around knowledge of politics – Hill’s (a) and (c) – certainly characterize epistocratic frame and its perception about the place of knowledge in political decision-making.

### *Instrumental vs. Political Agency and the Risk of an Epistemic Reductionism*

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<sup>66</sup> López-Guerra parallel between universal suffrage and institutional design (presidentialism or parliamentarism) precisely recalls Arneson instrumental view over democracy and the possibility to disenfranchise if that increases chances of having good consequences. «Systems of governance should be assessed by their consequences; any individual has a moral right to exercise political power just to the extent that the granting of this right is productive of best consequences overall» (Arneson 2004: 40).



Epistocracy pointed out the presence of an irreplaceable epistemic component in the political decision-making process. Accent on the weight of knowledge is put by resorting to instrumental assessment of political process, in which epistemic reliability represents the key to provide good political outcomes. Politics is about giving resolutions and knowledge, in turn, paves the way to good ones. However, the interpretation proposed by epistocratic instrumentalism about the nature and, consequently, the function of episteme in decision-making raises a fundamental problem for the theoretical validity of this position. As this section tries to show, the epistemic circumstances of the political domain make instrumentalism completely unattainable, if not dangerous.

Definition of political knowledge proposed in chapter 2 is centered on the acknowledgement of epistemic *facts* of political disputes. These “facts” can divide “right” and “wrong” information about politics by the force of two traits. First, recalling Arendt, epistemic facts are «brutally elementary» (Arendt 2006: 234), that is, they transmit fundamental aspects of political world, easy understandable but nonetheless powerfully capable to orient citizens. Second, epistemic facts about politics are “coercive”, in the sense that they are beyond dispute, that is, are the fundamental points in developing disagreements. Moore reflects on Arendt’s notion of facts by noting that they «are coercive in the sense that it is not a matter of choice whether global warming exists or Germany started the first world war (to take Arendt’s example)» (Moore 2020: 11). As suggested in chapter 2, facts in politics are given in three fields: rules of the game, cruxes of political debate and protagonists of politics. To be knowledgeable about these facts provides citizens an empowerment to take political decisions, without relieving citizens themselves of making a choice between different and viable options. Such a plurality of options is perceived and admitted by instrumentalists themselves, as Arneson remarks. «Suppose ten conceptions are tied for best, given the best moral theorizing and reasons assessment that is presently ideally available. In that case, it would not be unreasonable to implement a political system geared to achieving any of the ten» (Arneson 2004: 53). Knowledge about political

facts as possession of *right* information increases the chances of being aware decision-maker but, again, that empowerment is not guarantee that “right” decisions (if given) will be make. As Besussi puts it, “facts” are the cognitive background of discussions, disagreements, deliberation concerning political issues (Besussi 2018: 28). In this view, episteme as factual political knowledge defines the context and the contours for arguing about politics. Recalling Rapeli’s distinction, epistemic empowerment descending from political knowledge creates the conditions for political “sophistication”.<sup>67</sup> Sophisticated people go beyond the knowledge of political “facts” and “stakes” of political debate. They comprehend sentiments and beliefs, imagine developments of given situations, and understand nuanced positions. Sophistication is the result of experience, constant attention to politics and, also, the fruit of talent and interest. However, even sophistication cannot provide univocal truths about direction to take in public decision-making.

Difficult of instrumentalism are linked to the unrealistic depiction of the epistemic circumstances of politics. Political knowledge, differently from epistocratic reading, has nothing to do with competence in the hands of “instrumental agents”. Those agents have clear goals to achieve and a plurality of means (strategies/methods/styles) to reach their objectives. Arneson openly declares to intend political agent as instrumental agent, geared to find the right way to the find out the “treasury” (author’s image).

The instrumentalist as I conceive her is a realist about morality but can and should be a fallibilist about our present moral knowledge. There is moral truth, but our current epistemic access to it is uncertain, shaky. [...] Analogy: we are searching for genuine treasure, and our practices

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<sup>67</sup> Rapeli provides the following distinction between simple “political knowledge” and the more advanced expertise of “sophistication”. «Being politically sophisticated is therefore something more than just being politically knowledgeable. It entails expertise in the political domain, thus describing someone who has cognitively organized a great body of knowledge about politics, so that it can be recalled and utilized. One might say that all politically sophisticated individuals are also politically knowledgeable, but not all politically knowledgeable individuals are necessarily politically sophisticated». (Rapeli 2014: 12-3).

should be assessed instrumentally, by the degree to which they enable us to gain treasure. Our current maps guiding us to treasure are flawed, and our current ideas about what ‘treasure’ is are somewhat crude, and we have reason to believe there are better maps to be located and better conceptions of ‘treasure’ to be elaborated. So our practices should be judged by the degree to which they enable us to attain genuine treasure. (Arneson 2009: 43-4)

However, politics rises dilemmas on the goals to pursue and, accordingly, experts’ knowledge can be contested – to recall Arneson’s analogy – for the treasury they intend to discover. Very briefly, instrumentalism would present political agency as instrumental agent. This point is clearly made by Ober and Caranti. «Experts in a given domain (say, chess masters) are more capable than others at producing a desired outcome (winning) and the probability of achieving the outcome is increased by better choices (good moves)» (Ober 2013: 107). Political expertise, Ober continues, is markedly distant from chess master’s knowledge. There are «no general experts in politics because, lacking access to the Form of the Good [...], such experts would need to master a range of hard-to-acquire specialized expertise that exceeds the bounds of human cognitive capacity» (Ibidem). Ober emphasizes that political knowledge is not monist: it covers many fields and makes considerably hard to control all the implication of every move on political chessboard. The epistemic circumstances of politics differ from those typical of the Arneson’s treasure hunt (or playing chess, in Ober’s case) as the difficulties begin in determining which object to look for or even in deciding whether a treasure exists, and the search should begin. Raiders of treasures are instrumental agents, political decision-makers are not.

Caranti highlights a further difficulty implied by instrumental view over politics. «Politics is assumed to be about finding the best means for certain goals, not about setting those goals» (Caranti 2017: 135). In other words, politics is understood exactly as ground for “instrumental agents”, capable to find right means to achieve shared ends. However, such ends are not just composite and complex to be singled out – as Ober noted – but also matter of persistent disagreement. «As political philosophers we know well that even apparent non-controversial political goals such as “the well-being of the

community” or “the modernization of the society” are indeed ambiguous and controversial» (Caranti 2017: 135). This kind of ends are not just cognitive sophisticated but also entangled with counterposed values and worldview, as Caranti remarks. «These questions attract legitimate and reasonable disagreement which cannot be cured by a better knowledge, but ultimately by a choice made by the political community» (Caranti 2017: 135). Accordingly, instrumental conception oversimplifies the cognitive and axiological frame of political decision-making. Political knowledge must grapple with disagreement as permanent trait of political scenario. The obvious repercussion is that alethic categories such as “right” or “wrong” can be only applied to a limited host of elementary, coercive, and fundamental information.

Political decision-maker are thus far from being “instrumental agent” as the chess master, the treasures’ hunter, or the engineer aimed at verifying if a stable bridge can be built across the river. <sup>68</sup> Focusing on this last case of instrumental agent, Peter stresses an important point.

The decision on whether or not to build the bridge depends only on one factor, namely on the stability of the planned bridge. [...] In cases such as the bridge case, the verdict of the town engineer appears to be sufficient to legitimize the decision that the bridge should be built. (Peter 2016: 134)

Peter insists that instrumental agents have the legitimacy to prevail in cases where circumstances are merely epistemic. Conversely, if decisions trespass episteme by triggering ultimate disputes of will and values, instrumental agents must retreat, and other form of agency must be taken into account. Peter describes a similar scenario in her investigation on epistemic circumstances of democracy.

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<sup>68</sup> The example of the bridge is sketch by Peter and is a further instance of “instrumental agent”, who uses knowledge to achieve predetermined objectives (2016: 134).

The availability of third-personal epistemic authority presents the correctness theory of democratic legitimacy with the following authority dilemma: if practical authority is justified on epistemic grounds, then legitimate practical authority is non-democratic. If, on the other hand, the practical authority of democracy is to be legitimate, it must be justified on non-epistemic grounds. (Peter 2016: 138)

Instrumental approach to political decision-making suffers the flaw of assuming unrealistic epistemic circumstances to legitimize distribution of political power according to political knowledge. Subordination of power to knowledge, followed by epistocracy, grounds on misleading depiction of political decision-making as the field of instrumental agents and their relative epistemic strength. Nevertheless, as seen, instrumentalism becomes possible if an “epistemic reductionism” is embraced, where political process is interpreted as a mere chain of cognitive problems and technical evaluations. However, such reductionism can be hardly accepted, unless the presence of several areas of expertise and axiological disagreement in politics get denied. As said, the decision to bite the bullet before present criticisms highlights the possible danger behind the claims of tenacious epistocrats. One might argue that difficulties and disagreements in deciding the ends of political process are denied by epistocrats because they have predetermined the goals to pursue and are strongly unwilling to see their preferences questioned by others.

As admitted at the beginning of the section, epistocrats have the significant merit to shed light on the epistemic side of decision-making. Still, by embracing instrumentalism, they endorse a problematic “epistemic reductionism”, according to which political decisions are nothing more than epistemic decisions and citizens are nothing but instrumental agents. Instrumentalism develops a questionable philosophy of citizenship by disfiguring citizens’ political agency and presenting knowledge of politics as a mere technical tool designed to achieve universally shared goals. In this regard, instrumentalism represents a philosophical misunderstanding of epistemic circumstances characterizing democratic process and, in turn, epistocracy ends up

proposing institutional remedies based on the unsustainable premise that political decisions are only episteme.

### **3. Political Knowledge and Proceduralism**

#### *Equality, Liberty and Disagreement*

The role of political knowledge within democratic paradigm can be examined through very different lenses from the instrumental ones worn by epistocratic theorists. The focus on the results of the public decision-making process can be replaced by the attention to the process that produces political decisions. To better get the contrast at stake, consider Scott Hershovitz's incisive quotation about human decision-making: «making decisions together can be more important than getting them right» (Hershovitz 2003: 218). Hershovitz's comment describes two different approaches to decision-making by comparing effectiveness (taking right decisions) and inclusiveness (taking decisions together). Obviously, instrumentalism is embodied by the concern for effectiveness and good results. On the contrary, focus on inclusiveness betrays an interest for the nature of decision-making process and subordinates the evaluations of outcomes to the assessment of how those outcomes are provided.

Very shortly, what matters in this second reading is the way political decisions are taken and the nature of the procedure leading to final resolutions. In this light, given the focus on procedure, this approach to political decision-making is defined as “proceduralism”. Like instrumentalism, proceduralism represents a theoretical approach to the problem of “political legitimacy”. As such, proceduralism is aimed at justifying political authority and the issues it commands.<sup>69</sup> Without entering the several

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<sup>69</sup> Political legitimacy concerns the moral authority to rule. «When we evaluate a state for its legitimacy, our concern is to assess its moral authority to govern. [...] The problem of legitimacy is, then, to explain how a state can have the moral authority to do the kinds of thing involved in

issues raised by the notion of “political legitimacy”, crucial here is to understand the conception of democracy embraced by proceduralists and cast light on the role played by episteme in this paradigm.

Many theorists endorsed and developed procedural approach to normative reflection on democracy and contribute to create a mosaic of positions and perspectives (Peter 2009: 65-74; Ottonelli 2012a). We might label the version of proceduralism under consideration here as non-epistemic proceduralism because it crowds out episteme from the foundation of the democratic paradigm. On this point we shall return to in the next section. From these premises, we cope with non-epistemic proceduralism as presented in different ways by scholars such as Urbinati, Hill, Viehoff, Saffon, and Invernizzi-Accetti. A very rough reconstruction of this kind of proceduralism is possible by focusing on three fundamental points: equality, liberty, deciding in disagreement. These concepts and the connections between them represent the pillars of the of procedural understanding of democracy.

To begin with, in procedural view, democracy finds its *raison d'être* in the protection of individual liberty. Even more, protection of liberty is linked to the recognition of public equality among citizens. Urbinati and Saffon stress this aspect by describing democracy exactly as the “bulwark of equal liberty”.

[P]roceduralism defines democracy as the very political process that it puts in motion; democracy’s normative value resides in the process’ unbeatable capacity to protect and promote

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governing» (Copp 1999: 4-5). Peter emphasizes the different approaches to this concept. «Some associate legitimacy with the justification of coercive power and with the creation of political authority. Others associate it with the justification, or at least the sanctioning, of existing political authority. Authority stands for a right to rule—a right to issue commands and, possibly, to enforce these commands using coercive power. An additional question is whether legitimate political authority is understood to entail political obligations or not. Most people probably think it does. But some think that the moral obligation to obey political authority can be separated from an account of legitimate authority, or at least that such obligations arise only if further conditions hold» (Peter 2017).

equal political liberty. [...] The proceduralist vision insists that equal political liberty is the most important good for which democracy should strive. And it posits that the modern democratic procedure—based on every individual’s equal participation in fair and competitive elections for selecting political representatives and thereby contributing to the production of decisions via majority rule – is the best way of respecting equal liberty in a context of pluralism and dissent. (Saffon and Urbinati 2013: 441-2)

Liberty emerges as the central value democratic process can protect and, as said, its connection with equality and permanent disagreement already comes to light in this quotation. Setting the notion of disagreement aside for the moment, proceduralism understands the defense and the valorization of citizens’ equal liberty in decision-making as lingering at the heart of democracy’s normativity. Democracy has normative value and produces legitimate decisions because ensures everyone the liberty to have an equal say about public issues. Moreover, democracy presents the inclusion in decision-making as the guarantee that nobody is hushed up or dominated in political choices and deliberation. In fact, democratic paradigm takes for granted human fallibility and, instead of empowering a class of persons, relies on individual liberty as method and point of no return in political decision-making. In this regard, distribution of equal quota of political liberty is the power device through which democratic order makes nothing unchangeable: decisions can be revised, ruling class can be fired, new values can be discovered, and brutalities amended. Urbinati remarks this aspect very clearly by reiterating the centrality of freedom in procedural assessment of democratic institutions.

Democracy does much more than creating the conditions for good possible decisions, which we always want; it gives us also the certainty that any decision can be revised: no matter how good, or perfect, and no matter how incredibly important it is. [...] This is its substance because it makes us certain that we are always free to revise our decisions, to send home a political class or a majority, and beforehand that we are fallible in our inferences. We can of course make



mistakes—we are not gods after all—which is why we need democracy. (Knight; Landemore; Urbinati and Viehoff 2016: 148-9)<sup>70</sup>

Connection between equality and liberty in procedural understanding of democracy is as strong as the relationship between equality and the presence of persistent disagreement. Proceduralists argues that the “fact of disagreement” (Rawls 1993), that is, the impossibility of striving for unanimity about moral and axiological issues, forces us to design a decision-making process able to acknowledge everyone as equally entitled to express concerns and interests in the process itself. As a matter of fact, political affairs raise divisive questions which do not have clear and univocal solution. Christiano theorizes that equality among individuals in context of disagreement represents the winning argument for understanding democracy as intrinsically just process and, thus, legitimate decision-making procedure.

Democratic decision-making is the unique way to publicly embody equality in collective decision-making under the circumstances of pervasive conscientious disagreement in which we find ourselves. Democratic decision-making enables us all to see that we are being treated as equals despite disagreements as long as we take into account the facts of judgment and the interests that accompany them. Because democratic decision-making realizes public equality in this way, and there is pervasive disagreement on its outcomes, it is intrinsically just. (Christiano 2008: 75-6)

As specified above, proceduralism rests its normative reading of democracy on liberty, equality, and coping with permanent disagreement. Urbinati and Saffon have clearly expressed the connection between liberty and equality, presenting democracy as

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<sup>70</sup> A similar view over democracy is endorsed by Hill. «[T]he idea that democracy exists to generate ‘correct’ decisions seems to be a fundamental misunderstanding of its history. Rather, democracy emerged as a reaction to aristocracy (and other hierarchical, elite-based forms of rule) and as a struggle for the political participation of all – irrespective of social standing or levels of political competence – as the necessary condition for the enjoyment of liberty» (Hill 2016: 8).

defense of citizens' equal liberty. On the same wave, Christiano has shed light on how democracy preserves equality in circumstances of permanent disagreement. Quotations proposed connected the dots between keystones of procedural perspective, leaving open the bond between liberty and disagreement. This gap is, so to speak, filled by Viehoff's view over democracy as "arbitration". According to Viehoff, democracy consists in a set of rules geared to deciding in circumstances of persistent disagreement without subjecting those who dissent with final resolutions. Democracy is thus an arrangement of political power aimed at regulating lives of people by creating – to anticipate Viehoff's terms – coordination without subjection. Viehoff's analysis makes clear how citizens' liberty is preserved by democratic process despite the not surprising hostility fed by continuous dissents.

When non-subjection is a value, then disputants have reason to seek settlement on a common set of rules without reliance on arbitrary power advantages—or, more pithily, they have reason to seek 'coordination without subjection'. [...] By treating as binding the outcome of such impartial arbitration, the parties converge on a common set of rules, thus achieving coordination. And since neither party has asymmetrical power over the arbitrator or the arbitration procedure—this being a precondition of impartial arbitration—their coordination respects the requirement of non-subjection. [...] To avoid subjection, the arbitration mechanism must be impartial. Crucially, impartiality is not a matter of the content of the decision, but of how the decision is reached: without one party having greater power over the decision-making than the other. (Viehoff 2011: 256-7) <sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> As further proof of the fact that procedural authors mentioned are in tune with each other a passage of Christiano might be recalled. Christiano focuses on respect for those who disagree pointing in the same direction of Viehoff's argument of "coordination without subjection". The normative value of democracy therefore depends on overcoming (without deleting) the disagreement while respecting everyone's freedom. «Part of the point of political organization is to make decisions when there are serious disagreements regarding the matters to be decided. This is what politics is all about. [...] So it would seem that the legitimate authority of a state depends in part on whether it handles this kind of disagreement well: by treating those who disagree with it with respect and being responsive to their

Freedom, equality and coping with permanent disagreement are the normative pillars of non-epistemic proceduralism. These values are indeed incorporated and protected by democratic way to decide on political issues. Returning to Hershovitz's comment, what counts for procedural theorists is not the conclusion of decision-making but how it is conducted. Democracy is legitimate inasmuch it deals with political disagreement without jeopardizing liberty of citizens and equality among them.

### *Crowding out Episteme*

Previous section has sketched the contours of democratic non-epistemic proceduralism by discussing the role of liberty, equality, and disagreement. Returning to chapter's leading question, we can now investigate the normative role of political knowledge in democratic framework from the view of non-epistemic procedural theorists. To what extent is epistemic decisive for procedural justification of democracy?

According to the presented version of proceduralism, the episteme must be crowded out from the understanding and legitimation of democracy. Democracy produces legitimate decisions since it deals with political disagreement without jeopardizing liberty and equality among citizens. From this perspective, democracy performs a practical function, rather than cognitive one (Urbinati 2012: 203). In fact, democratic institutions are designed to coordinate dissent and make decision-making possible without violence and discrimination. Final decisions may even be *wrong* or epistemically flawed, this is not the point. Rather, such decisions acquire legitimacy as they mirror deliberation among free and equal citizens in arguing about what to do. Hence, episteme has no weight in understanding and legitimizing democracy.

Political knowledge and, more broadly, epistemic capacity to track "true", "good" or "competent" political decisions play no part in democratic paradigm. On the contrary,

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concerns. And I argued above that such respect requires that citizens have rights to participate in the decision-making as equals» (Christiano 2004: 280).

democracy derives its authority in including and advancing every person's interest and point of view, no matter how much they are informed and enlightened. Democracy is aimed at protecting everyone's equal liberty to have a say in political decisions, rather than valuing "informed" or "enlightened" say by the denizens. Urbinati and Saffon clearly asserts the inner contradiction in epistemic view of democracy. Epistemic democracy sounds as an oxymoron.

Epistemic doctrine advances two projects that directly clash with democratic proceduralism: transforming political decision making into a chapter in the search for truth, and subjecting the democratic process to a criterion of judgment that transcends it. The first project challenges democracy's promise of protecting equal liberty. Against aristocracy, democracy emerges as a struggle for the political participation of all, regardless of their status or competence, as the necessary condition for enjoying liberty. Democracy does not promise decisions that are more correct than those achieved by a group of experts, but decisions that express the choice of the many – while respecting everyone's rights. From this perspective, epistemic democracy is an oxymoron. (Saffon and Urbinati 2013: 446)

Democratic faith is not a question of epistemic performance. Admittedly, democrats expect cognitive imperfections to play a role in decision-making but are still willing to engage with others to determine which direction to take. In this light, democratic concern for the protection of equal freedom in decisions that raise disagreement explains the adoption of the majority rule. Lagerspetz brilliantly reconstructs the history of majority rules by showing the different attempts (doomed to fail) to introduce epistemic into the legitimation of democracy. «Following Aristotle, the medieval and the early-modern theorists interpreted decision-making in epistemic terms. From this perspective, the aim of collective decision-making is not to solve interest conflicts but to find the truth of a proposition (for example, 'Is this the right policy or not?）」 (Lagerspetz 2010: 31). This approach to politics, argues Lagerspetz, originates from a long tradition, which interprets political decision-making as the domain of the *sanior pars*, that is, the wisest members of society. However, permanent difficulties in

establishing who belongs to *sanior pars* paved the way to “numbers” as new criterion to come to decisions. Nevertheless, epistemic justification had not lost its grip and majority opinions was first presumed to embody the required *sanioritas*. In Lagerspetz’s reading, the turning point was Hobbes’ conception of political authority and following reflection of Pufendorf.<sup>72</sup> These authors set the stage for understanding political decision-making as a process devoted to conferring power and create authority to decide. In this procedure, truth is not given, remains hidden or even manifests itself in the form of continuous dissent. Thus, contrary to epistocracy, which puts power at the service of knowledge, this perspective reduces politics as the exclusive province of handling and assigning power. As Hobbes famously put it: *auctoritas, non veritas facit legem*. Democracy concerns exactly distribution of power and creation of authority, setting aside epistemic considerations (Hobbes’ *veritas*) as contestable ground to set forth the rules for society.

### *Anti-epistemic Reductionism*

Procedural interpretation of democratic decision-making represents the conceptual systematization of skepticism towards epistemic instrumentalism. In essence, proceduralists distance themselves from the core assumption of instrumentalism, which is, the reduction of political decision-making to a mere technical/epistemic practice. The analysis of instrumentalism has tried to show how instrumental perspective on political decision-making oversimplifies, if not trivializes, the cognitive

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<sup>72</sup> «One of the central lessons of Hobbes’s political theory was that the practical meaning of all the noble-sounding words like ‘right’, ‘justice’, ‘Natural Law’, ‘equity’ or ‘wisdom’ was dependent on authoritative interpretation. Hobbesian logic [...] demonstrated that the conception of *sanior pars* simply transferred the power of decision to the ultimate arbitrator. Hence, although a decision based on wisdom and on arguments was still the ideal, Pufendorf recognized that, if decision-making were to be conceived as a collective task, at some level of hierarchy an equality of wisdom had to be presumed» (Lagerspetz 2010: 39).

and axiological frame of political decision-making by reducing politics to the outcome-oriented attempt to track right decisions, as if it were a treasure hunt, a game of chess or the construction of a bridge (chapter 3, section 2). In this way, political agency turns into instrumental agency and political knowledge is downsized to technical competence. As seen above, behind such a comprehension of political decision-making hides an unrealistic interpretation of “political knowledge” as the power to overcome permanent disagreement spread in society. Quite the opposite, proceduralism grounds on recognizing as inevitable disagreement among the people. As Shapiro brilliantly puts: «[o]nce we grant that what justice requires is, and is likely to remain, debatable, some sort of procedural tack inevitably forces itself onto the agenda» (Shapiro 1999: 19). Moreover, Kelsen recognized the value of dissent among the people. For this reason, he describes relativism as cardinal conquest of democratic order to safeguard citizens’ will and equality.

He who views absolute truth and absolute values as inaccessible to the human understanding cognition must deem not only his own, but also the opinion of others at least as feasible. The idea of democracy thus presupposes relativism as its worldview. Democracy values everyone’s political will equally, just as it gives equal regard to each political belief and opinion, for which the political will, after all, is merely the expression. (Kelsen 2013: 103)

In line with Kelsen’s theoretical pattern, non-epistemic proceduralists strongly reject epistemic reductionism evoked by instrumental and epistocratic model in favor of a “truth-free” conception of democracy. This kind of view over democratic decision-making challenges the possible role of political knowledge and the appeal to political *facts*. As seen in second chapter, political knowledge cannot provide “absolute truths” about decisions to take. However, being political knowledgeable embodies the awareness about *modest truths* concerning the rules of the game, the crux of the public debate, and the protagonists on political scene. Taking political knowledge seriously entails a commitment to truth understood as the cognitive aptitude to overcome insouciance and base political deliberation on the knowledge of simple facts on which

disagreement hardly raise. Procedural concern for the “explosive” effects of introducing political truths in context of pluralism and permanent disagreement feeds precisely the suspicion that such an epistemic element risks short-circuiting the protection of equal freedom guaranteed by democracy. Hence, from procedural perspective, democracy as bulwark of equal liberty in context of permanent dissent must be careful not to open the door to truth in the field of politics. Invernizzi-Accetti formulates this *caveat* by condemning the orientation towards truth characteristic of populist and technocratic understanding of democracy.

The fact that these political forms pit the ‘wisdom of the people’ against the ‘wisdom of elites’ doesn’t necessarily appear as a problem, because democratic institutions are designed to deal with conflict and disagreement. Instead, the problem posed by populism and technocracy is that they reintroduce an orientation towards ‘truth’ within the framework of a political regime that is based in its exclusion – or at least suspension – from the political domain. (Invernizzi-Accetti 2020: 6)

According to proceduralism, truth in democracy would appear as a Trojan horse. Protection of equal freedom would be undermined by the search for accuracy and, likewise, people’s interests could not be protected unless their epistemic validity is ascertained. Recognizing a weight and a role to political knowledge in the justification of democratic paradigm would annihilate the paradigm itself, leading to intolerance and violence. As Urbinati put it: «once *episteme* enters the domain of politics, the possibility that political equality gets questioned is in the air because the criterion of competence is intrinsically inegalitarian» (Urbinati 2014: 83). Similarly, Christiano observes: «I am not convinced that epistemic proceduralism is not an unstable mix of ideas» (Christiano 2009: 235). So, if we strive to defend a democratic organization of political space, episteme has forcefully to be left at the door. Again, Urbinati and Saffon clearly express this gloomy certainty.

Once it is made the terrain of truth, politics becomes inhospitable to contestation and peace. Truth entrusts competence as authority, thereby making opinion pluralism transitory. [...]

Moreover, appeals to truth do not contribute to accommodation and compromise, so in the context of more-than-transitory pluralism, they foster intolerance and even violence. (Saffon and Urbinati 2013: 448)

It would be wrong to argue that proceduralism discourages or condemns the epistemic commitment to understanding the “facts” of politics. Likewise, it is incorrect to say that – from a procedural perspective – civic education and the formation of citizenship would lead to intolerance or violence. The point is more subtle: these practices are allowed and encouraged, as long as this epistemic commitment is not understood as a fundamental part of the democratic decision-making process. Epistemically “healthy” citizens matter for democracy without representing a factor to consider democratic framework legitimated.

To reiterate this position on episteme, Urbinati concedes the importance of political knowledge for democratic citizenship but, she continues, epistemic remains confined to a different level in relation to the heart of the decision-making procedures of democracy. In this regard, Urbinati describes democracy as a “diarchy” of “will” and “opinion”.

[R]epresentative democracy is a diarchic system in which “will” (by which I mean the right to vote and the procedures and institutions that regulate the making of authoritative decisions) and “opinion” (by which I mean the extrainstitutional domain of political opinions) influence each other and cooperate without merging. [...] The conceptualization of representative democracy as diarchy makes two claims: that “will” and “opinion” are the two powers of the sovereign citizens, and that they are different and should remain distinct, although in need of constant communication. (Urbinati 2014: 2)

The separation between the executive (“will”) and epistemic (“opinion”) elements of democratic set up does not seem to faithfully characterize the role of citizens as decision-makers. Rather, Urbinati’s diarchy introduces a sharp division in the way citizens are affected and operate in politics. Her reconstruction of the democratic process entails a significant theoretical cost, as it is unable to recognize the epistemic



element of decision-making as necessarily connected and conditioning the exercise of political will by citizens. The need for constant communication between “will” and “opinion” is in fact recognized by Urbinati herself who, however, is reluctant to conceive this interrelation in a unitary model of democratic society.

Preclusion to the role of episteme associates proceduralists with a peculiar form of reductionism, opposite of that recognized for instrumentalism. Very briefly, proceduralism escapes from the abovementioned epistemic reductionism – typical of its rival conception – ending up theorizing an anti-epistemic reductionism, that is, the denial of episteme as vital part of democratic decision-making process. Such a position is paradoxically motivated by an instrumentalist interpretation of political knowledge. In fact, the procedural conception of democracy is not accompanied by a procedural understanding of the role of knowledge within democracy. Peter evokes this problem describing the “consequentialist epistemology” behind Dewey’s and Estlund’s epistemic proceduralism. These authors «assume that there are some shared goals that can give direction to the aim of problem-solving and inform the assessment of the consequences of different proposals» (Peter 2008: 44). Knowledge would thus act as bearings to right resolutions, as instrument to solve social problems – plain and simple. Thus, the distance from the instrumentalist conception does not save proceduralists from seeing knowledge as an “instrument” for obtaining certain results. The introduction of this conception of episteme in proceduralism would immediately lead to the problems discussed in the case of instrumentalism, that is, a deformation of politics in the name of technique. In the words of Invernizzi-Accept, a similar conception of knowledge would carry with it «an impoverished conception of politics as the search for the “right” solutions to a set of previously given problems, effectively reducing it to an exercise in problem solving akin to any other technical or cognitive endeavor» (Invernizzi-Accepti 2017: 13).

To avoid the same reductionist drift of instrumentalism, non-epistemic proceduralism goes in the opposite direction, closing the doors to the episteme by virtue of the content and commitment to truth that it implies. As we have seen, we thus pass from an

epistemic reductionism to an anti-epistemic reductionism. However, it is possible to escape both of these forms of reductionism through an alternative – procedural – interpretation of the episteme. To do this, it is necessary to reject the idea that knowledge does represent a complex of comprehensive truths, with a normative value, capable of illuminating the right choice to be made. On the contrary, the challenge is to advance an alternative understanding of knowledge as an element of service to the decision-making process, which enriches both deliberation and decision-makers without imposing precise solutions. In this sense, the critique of anti-epistemic reductionism offers the spark to elaborate a proceduralism sensitive to the epistemic aspects involved in democratic decision-making and to reconcile the protection of equal freedom in a context of disagreement with the value of political knowledge.

#### **4. Political Knowledge and Enlightened Proceduralism**

*“Enlightened Understanding” by Dahl*

The issue of political knowledge and its relevance in democracy recurs several times in the analyses of Robert Dahl. The Yale scholar interprets the demos’ epistemic ability to understand politics as a grounding aspect of democratic self-government ideal. In a nutshell, Dahl argues that political knowledge of citizenship constitutes a normative condition for the existence of democracy. Recalling the first section of this chapter, Dahl’s contributions enrich the inquiry about theoretical expectations linked to the adoption of democratic order and helps developing a philosophy of citizenship consistent with such an inquiry.

In Dahl’s reading, there are five conditions that democracy must abide by: effective participation, equality in voting, enlightened understanding, final control over the agenda and inclusion of adults. Needless to say, the author’s focus on political knowledge is expressed by the term “enlightened understanding”. Overall, these five aspects represent the normative landmarks to realize a «fully democratic decision-

making process» (Dahl 1989: 196). To put it differently, Dahl insists that democratic decision-making enables citizens to realize equal liberty in context of persistent disagreement if these five requirements are recognized and met. The American theorist clearly alerts us of the risks behind the violation of the mentioned conditions. «Each is necessary if the members [...] are to be politically equal in determining the policies of the association. To put it in another way, to the extent that any of the requirements is violated, the members will not be politically equal» (Dahl 1998: 38).

In line with procedural approach to democracy, Dahl appeals to protection of equality to stress that democracy is legitimate in so far as it can embody a fair decision-making procedure. However, differently from “non-epistemic proceduralism” considered in previous section, Dahl considers political knowledge of citizens a pivotal aspect and a normative element for democratic paradigm. Interestingly, he re-invokes the protection of equality to underline the connection of democracy as fair procedure and episteme: «the principle of political equality assumes that the members are all equally well qualified to participate in decisions provided they have adequate opportunities to learn about the matters before the association by inquiry, discussion, and deliberation» (Dahl 1998: 39). Dahl brilliantly depicts the role of political knowledge by stressing the epistemic side of political participation and, even more, paves the way to theorize a version of democratic proceduralism capable to escape the “anti-epistemic reductionism” and recognize a normative role to episteme in the foundations of democracy.

Before developing a different version of proceduralism, let’s take a step back to focus on Dahl’s examination of “political knowledge”. As seen, Dahl refers to the epistemic empowerment provided by political knowledge with the suggestive notion of “enlightened understanding”. «In order to express his or her preferences accurately, each citizen ought to have adequate and equal opportunities for discovering and validating, in the time permitted by the need for a decision, what his or her preferences are on the matter to be decided» (Dahl 1989: 169). By “enlightened understanding” is meant first of all the knowledge about ends that politics should protect. However,

knowledge about ends is not sufficient for comprehending politics. An exhaustive reflection on ideal ends is not enough if this is not accompanied by knowledge of possible means. Political action encounters various limits (scarcity of resources, limited time, vetoes) and, therefore, can be forced to reshape the ends to be pursued according to the means available. Simply put, means are crucial part of the play in politics and, accordingly, understanding politics entails understanding possible means to get things done. As Dahl himself observes, it is impossible to figure out political debate without paying attention to means. «Means and ends are in a state of constant flux that requires constant reassessment. To give leadership a blank check on the choice of means is, in fact, to let it dictate the ends of society» (Dahl 1950: 80). Hence, citizens' understanding of political action should not neglect or undermine a careful attention to the instruments the rulers are going to resort.

Following this line of reasoning, Dahl systematizes two epistemic poles of political competence, which respectively refer to the knowledge of ends and means.

In order to be qualified to govern – to be politically competent – people should possess three qualities. People who govern should have an adequate understanding of the proper ends, goals, or objectives that the government should strive to reach. Let me call this the quality of *moral understanding or moral capacity*. (Dahl 1989: 57).

But even moral competence is not sufficient: we all know what the road to Hell is paved with. Rulers should also know the best, most efficient, and most appropriate means to achieve desirable ends. In short, they ought to possess adequate *technical or instrumental knowledge*. (Dahl 1989: 58)<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> One may object that in this passage Dahl appears to describe the rulers' – and not citizens' – competence. Therefore, moral and instrumental knowledge defined above would not portray the enlightened understanding, or at least not the one required to the citizens. However, such a remark can easily be rejected since it passes over the structure of Dahl's argument. In fact, both the concepts of moral and technical knowledge are presented by Dahl within a hypothetical dialogue between a democrat and an aristocrat and refers to the owners of political power. Accordingly, it describes

Dahl's "enlightened understanding" largely overlaps with the analysis of "foreground" and "background" elements outlined in chapter 2 (section 4). On the one hand, the moral capacity corresponds to the ability to identify the ends to be supported or, in the terms set out above, the foreground elements. On the other hand, the ability to understand the appropriate means to achieve the desired ends refers to the knowledge of the background elements, that is, to episteme as knowledge of facts. "Enlightened understanding" represents a pillar or, with Dahl's words, has to do with democracy.

One might object, I suppose, that enlightenment has nothing to do with democracy. But I think this would be a foolish and historically false assertion. It is foolish because democracy has usually been conceived as a system in which "rule by the people" makes it more likely that "the people" will get what it wants, or what it believes is best, than alternative systems, like aristocracy, in which an elite determines what is best. But to know what it wants, or what is best, the people must be enlightened, at least to some degree. (Dahl 1989: 168-9)

Dahl dwells on the "enlightened understanding" as dominant trait of democracy to highlight that people themselves have a political agency that includes a properly epistemic aspect and reveals people's capability to understand the world and translate that understanding into political will. Democracy assumes this kind of agency. With Bennett words, «informed citizens armed with the knowledge necessary to appreciate their own interests and to make intelligent political judgements is a key element of democracy» (Bennett 1988: 477). Accordingly, this alethic capacity must be valued to allow people to understand and judge politics precisely because they are able to understand and judge it. From Dahl's perspective, democracy has intrinsically to do with "enlightenment" since it organizes political power starting from the recognition of human beings as rational and reasonable entities, who understands the reality in

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political knowledge of aristocrats in aristocracy, epistocrats (or guardians, as Dahl define them) in an epistocracy (or guardianship) and – obviously – citizens in democracy. Thus, the notion of political knowledge under consideration corresponds with citizens' knowledge of politics.

which they live. In this regard, Dahl argues, it is absurd to deny the connection between democracy and episteme, or, in his words, between democracy and “enlightenment”. Instead, democracy is “enlightened” arrangement of political power because it protects people’s capacity to comprehend their world and trust everyone’s epistemic capacity to understand, deliberate and decide on collective problems.

### *“Serviceable Truth” and Enlightened Proceduralism*

As seen above, non-epistemic reductionism leads proceduralists to distrust the possible mix between proceduralism and the epistemic accuracy. In this perspective, it appears impossible to hold together the procedural conviction that democracy produces legitimate decisions while protecting the equal freedom of citizens in conditions of disagreement with the attention to the epistemic accuracy of such decisions. On the contrary, proceduralism would implicitly force to detach democratic authority from any kind of epistemic concern. The rigor of knowledge, pure proceduralists argue, would end up threatening the necessary inclusiveness of pluralistic societies. Urbinati, Saffon and Christiano, as shown, warn against the risks of introducing episteme into procedural understanding of democracy (chapter 3, section 3). By discussing Estlund’s “epistemic proceduralism”, Richardson seems to agree with these authors by insisting on the risk that procedural attention to episteme might ground on an overevaluation of human capacity to get “right answers” about political problems.<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless,

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<sup>74</sup> Estlund’s epistemic proceduralism has the same goal that we are trying to pursue in this investigation: to combine the epistemic element with a procedural justification of democracy. Estlund summarizes his argument in his *Democratic Authority*. «My argument in this book is not that some democratic form of government would be epistemically better than every alternative. Rather, it is that democracy will be the best epistemic strategy from among those that are defensible in terms that are generally acceptable. If there are epistemically better methods, they are too controversial—among qualified points of view, not just any points of view—to ground legitimately imposed law» (Estlund 2008: 41). Unlike Estlund’s hybrid conception of proceduralism, what is proposed here is a form of

Richardson does not abandon the idea that a “palatable” version of epistemic conception of democracy remains possible.

I also share his [Estlund’s] view that for an epistemic conception of democracy to be palatable under conditions of pluralism, it must be combined with an emphasis on fair procedure. [...] Still, in my view, in his development of an “epistemic proceduralism” that combines the epistemic and procedural elements, Estlund has understated the centrality of procedural fairness to state authority by insufficiently accounting for the degree to which in politics epistemic constraints leave matters importantly underdetermined. (Richardson 2011: 327)

Besides Richardson’s hope, attempts to connect procedural perspective with a normative appreciation of episteme increases in number. However, fusion of epistemic into proceduralism often creates confusion about the nature of the argument. Knight, for instance, observes that both procedural and consequentialist theorists of democracy can resort to episteme (Knight; Landemore; Urbinati and Viehoff 2016: 140). To spell all doubts, as Richardson rightly noted, and provide a procedural comprehension of political knowledge, epistemic accuracy must be adapted to disagreement and cognitive uncertainty proper of democratic order as characterized by proceduralists themselves. With Urbinati’s words, such conceptual operation is possible «by reinterpreting truth as a process of searching and emending, dissenting and conflicting, a process that closely resembles democratic politics» (Urbinati 2012: 214). To put another way, insisting on knowledge as public value should not collide with acknowledgment that political knowledge cannot provide “smoking gun” about political choices. As Jasanoff sagaciously stated: «[w]e need a discourse more attuned

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proceduralism that rejects, contrary to what Estlund does, an instrumental conception of episteme as means to get good decisions. Rather, turning point is the disconnecting knowledge to performance in getting results and develop a purely procedural understanding of knowledge as enlightenment about the background elements of decision-making. In this second view, the episteme does not represent the tool for right decisions but, much more modestly, the resource that binds decision-making to people’s ability to grasp information on the problems at stake and decide accordingly.

to findings from the history, sociology, and politics of knowledge that truth in the public domain is not simply out there, ready to be pulled into service like the magician's rabbit from a hat» (Jasanoff 2017: 28).

Dahl's attention to "enlightened understanding" within his procedural framework of democratic legitimacy offers the ground to make a step further. Developing Dahl's normative pattern, we can say that democracy incorporates episteme into its paradigm by recognizing citizens' capacity to comprehend the world, to grasp important truths for the life of society and to make these truths decisive in political decision-making. Democracy empowers the people by recognizing their inborn capacity to shape the fate of the community through principles derived from comprehending the world, rather than act instinctually or randomly. Mastering a certain understanding of the world stands out humanity and makes "truths" about the world count, especially when every individual is entitled to take political decisions. Here again, those "truths" must be interpreted with certain modesty to be combinable with principles of proceduralism. To be clear, episteme as knowledge about truth must not be understood instrumentally, as if it were the key to accessing the right political decisions and closing the door in the face of those who disagree. Right the contrary, "enlightenment" descending from political knowledge must represent a common value for all participants in the public debate, a resource to enrich the deliberation of the demos without endangering equal liberty among participants. In this view, "enlightenment" of political knowledge embodies a procedural value of democratic decision-making, as it serves the people coming together to understand, discuss and take stand about what to do.

Procedural value of episteme as political knowledge about facts can be better explained through Jasanoff's notion of "serviceable truths". Knowledge about political facts consists of «robust statements about the condition of the world, with enough buy-in from both science and society to serve as a basis for collective decisions» (Jasanoff 2017: 25). Again, those truths are not the proverbial "magician's rabbit from a hat". Rather, as Jasanoff argues, they embody «state of knowledge that satisfies tests of scientific acceptability and supports reasoned decision-making, but also assures those



exposed to risk that their interests have not been sacrificed on the altar of an impossible scientific certainty» (Jasanoff 1990: 250). This degree of humility in setting knowledge into public sphere represents the first step to disconnect episteme from instrumental approach to democracy. It is worth noting that Jasanoff's notion arises in the context of the philosophy of science and refers to epistemic achievements in various fields of knowledge. Law of universal gravitation, for instance, is serviceable truth. Here, of course, the notion is adapted to the context of politics. In this sense, the domains of political identified (rules of the game, cruxes of public debate, political players) are the proper field of political serviceable truths. That the power of Congress limits that of the President is a political serviceable truth, such as the unemployment rate in a given year, or the fact that Gore was more liberal than Bush (all these examples are previously discussed, see chapter 2, section 2).<sup>75</sup>

Understood as “serviceable truth”, procedural essence of episteme can be better grasped. Consider this parallel. Taken as instrumental value, episteme is technical knowledge, knowledge about the rights answers, which make discussion unnecessary and lead to action. Taken as procedural value, episteme is knowledge about political modest and reliable “facts”. In politics, this kind of knowledge enriches political deliberation, which remains necessary, inclusive, and open-ended.

Procedural value of political knowledge is touched upon also by Rawls.

The publicity condition requires the parties to assume that as members of society they will also know the general facts. The reasoning leading up to the initial agreement is to be accessible to public understanding. Of course, in working out what the requisite principles are, we must rely upon current knowledge as recognized by common sense and the existing scientific consensus. But there is no reasonable alternative to doing this. We have to concede that as established beliefs change, it is possible that the principles of justice which it seems rational to acknowledge may likewise change. (Rawls 1999 [1971]: 480)

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<sup>75</sup> Of course, some scientific data often become political serviceable truths, as they represent cruxes of the public debate. During the Covid-19 pandemic, for instance, scientific data on the characteristics of the virus and its impact on the population have “served” political deliberation on decisions to take.

This passage from *A Theory of Justice* helps taking stock of political knowledge as procedural value in democratic society. Here Rawls takes into account “knowledge about general facts”, which largely overlaps episteme understood as a body of serviceable truths. The American philosopher makes three important points. First, this knowledge is constituted by a public and accessible agreement: with Rawls’ word it is “accessible to public understanding”. This reiterates that “serviceable truths” in politics does not derive from esoteric intuitions, rather, they are the product of human comprehension of reality disclosed and verifiable to everyone. Second, “established beliefs change”: they might change across time and progress. Therefore, truths at stake are modest and undogmatic in nature. Third, knowledge sustains and enables political decision-making. Rawls comes to say that “there is no reasonable alternative to doing this”. This last point particularly clarifies “enlightened understanding” as normative requirement within proceduralism. Democracy finds here the way to protect equal liberty, acknowledge persistent disagreement and, together with this, renounce anti-epistemic reductionism by giving appropriate weight to epistemic capacity of citizens. Philosophical pitfalls stemming from valuing knowledge are avoided by assuming that authoritative epistemic agreements can be given without being despotic or, again, by understanding political knowledge as serviceable truth and, thus, as procedural value. Rosenfeld stresses this point as founding idea of modern democracy.

[F]rom their findings, one the key characteristics of republics or modern representative democracies – at least in theory – has also been a commitment to an undogmatic, open-ended conception of truth. [...] [K]nowledge of the world – that which we collectively take to be true about the reality that surrounds us – continues to evolve and thus must always be subject to question, challenge and potential revision. Nothing should be set in stone. (Rosenfeld 2018: 26)<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> To return to the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, several scientific data have been updated over the months and some positions have been corrected. For example, at the beginning of the pandemic many

All in all, democracy derives its legitimacy from procedural fairness as protection of citizens' equal liberty in conditions of persistent disagreement. However, in this framework, anti-epistemic reductionism can be overcome through an interpretation of political knowledge as set of "serviceable truths" available to demos. Episteme finds its *raison d'être* as procedural value by realizing people's capacity to understand reality and decide accordingly. In this sense, democracy possesses a tangible epistemic side and derives political authority by institutionalizing human capacity to formulate truths concerning the context in which operate as decision-makers. Recalling Dahl's crucial contribution, we can call "enlightened proceduralism" this way of understanding procedural openness to episteme as serviceable and undogmatic knowledge. This conception of proceduralism does not aim to disavow the conclusions of non-epistemic theorists (see chapter 3, section 3), but to enrich the procedural approach by adding the episteme as the fourth pillar of the democratic paradigm (together with liberty, equality, disagreement). Democracy would thus derive its legitimacy from the protection of equal freedom in a context of permanent disagreement, by trusting human capacities to understand reality and decide accordingly. In this view, democratic rule ensures everyone an "equal say" in political process and such a "say" counts as recognition that individuals are not chained by instincts neither forced to act randomly. Rather, "equal say" grounds on human capacity to formulate and value imperfect but reliable truths about their world. Equal say is always also an "enlightened say".

### *Enlightened Proceduralism and Commitment of Institutions*

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experts raised doubts about the importance of wearing facemasks, in the following months that position was largely disavowed. Furthermore, it is important to note that the Covid-19 pandemic constitutes a difficult context in which to derive serviceable truths as it is characterized by the continuous change of scenario typical of emergency situations. In other fields of political discussion, for instance the rules of the game, it is much easier to isolate serviceable truths.

“Enlightened proceduralism” depicts democracy as the institutionalization of every human being’s capacity to understand reality and access public matters accordingly. “Political facts” or “serviceable truths” are one of the products of that capacity and set the stage for interpreting epistemic as procedural value within democratic framework. This makes visible how epistemic side of decision making conflates into procedural account of democracy. At this point, very simply, one might wonder why political ignorance represents a problem for such an understanding of democracy. In fact, democracy as recognition of citizens “enlightenment” does not contradicts the empirical evidence that citizens might still fail to know several political issues and end up being hobbits or hooligans – as Brennan incisively put. After all, capacity to understand reality does not imply epistemic perfection or infallibility, even in grasping and valuing “serviceable truths” or “political facts”. Put differently, no doubt that every citizen has the epistemic wherewithal to acquire political knowledge, but this ability is not equally distributed among individuals. Precisely for this reason, in democratic environment we encounter political ignorance and irrationality. So, “enlightened proceduralism” and its focus on *capacity* to get political knowledge does not seem to understand “little demos” as a problem to be faced.

Contrary to this sensible objection, this closing section argues that “enlightened proceduralism” entails a critical view over demos’ political ignorance. Furthermore, “enlightened proceduralism” makes a strong normative point by insisting on the need for democratic institutions to recognize, protect and spread episteme as factual truths in the public sphere. More specifically, the section proceeds in three steps. First, it insists that political ignorance collides with citizens’ epistemic capacity to take collective decisions, which democracy recognizes and institutionalizes. Second, it refers to Ottonelli’s notion of “performative respect” to explain that democratic framework as equalitarian rule assumes that people are equally competent to act as political agents. Third, the section argues that the assumption of equal competence, which is empirically absurd, embodies a sensible and reasonable premise if understood

as institutions' (not individuals') commitment to grasp and spread political knowledge in society, no matter if "enlightened understanding" is factually realized.

"Enlightened proceduralism" captures a very important aspect of democratic political agency by characterizing citizens as political actors capable to take power in their hands. Indeed, democratic rule does not just ensure that interest and rights of the people are protected, it also empowers the citizenry to realize such interests and rights *in the first person*. In this regard, democracy assumes people are competent political agent. Ottonelli stresses this point by emphasizing that democracy is not just the place of rights- and interests-bearers, but rather the terrain of competent political agents.

[A]long with the goal of protecting people's interests and rights, that citizens should be let define and protect them *in the first person*. However, this involves recognizing citizens as competent political agents, and valuing democracy because it recognizes and respects this capacity. (Ottonelli 2012b: 204)

Demos is called to build collective decisions by engaging in this process their ability to understand their own world, the world of others and figure out the possible world in which both themselves and the others can live together. This is made possible by the recognition of *equal* political power to each citizen and the assumption that they have *equal* capacity to be political decision-makers. Ottonelli concentrates on this second aspect and suggests that democratic agency can fully be understood and defended only if equal competence among citizens is assumed. In short, democratic paradigm distributes equal political power to the people *as if* they are equally competent to decide on public issues. Democracy order is linked to this idea of respect among citizens as possession of equal competence to be political decision-makers.

[E]qual respect should be conceived of not as a reflection of the actual recognition of people's equal competence but instead as the requirement that people be treated *as if* they were equally competent – independently of the actual evidence about their skills – by giving them an equal

opportunity to participate in the formation of collective decisions through the enjoyment of equal voting rights and the overall scheme of equal political liberties. (Ottonelli 2012b: 212)

If democracy identifies citizenship as a community of free and equal rulers, then equal competence must be taken as a precondition for this egalitarian way of organizing society. Differences among individuals in their capacity to understand reality and act accordingly must remain opaque.<sup>77</sup>

This description of citizens' political agency allows to see how demos' political ignorance represents a significant challenge for democracy. Ignorance about politics reveals the resounding asymmetry in possessing political knowledge and the consequent proof that citizens are not equally competent. Let's return to Dahl's idea of "enlightened understanding". His concept does not only offer the key to include episteme into proceduralism but also to conceive epistemic enlightenment of the demos as *normative requirement* of democratic authority. Dahl's "enlightened understanding" provides in this sense a double perspective, on the one hand it frames the just claims of individuals to be included in the decision-making process because they are capable to understand and assess public issues. On the other hand, "enlightened understanding" captures the need for democratic order to develop epistemic capacity of individuals. On this issue, Ottonelli notes that the respect accorded to citizens in the democratic sphere must be understood as "performative" precisely because it does not describe a real equality of knowledge and political competence but, rather, it is performative in

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<sup>77</sup> Idea of respect as implying opacity is brilliantly defended by Ian Carter. «The kind of respect I have in mind involves – with an important qualification to be mentioned immediately below – adopting a perspective that remains external to the person, and in this sense holding back from evaluating any of the variable capacities on which her moral personality supervenes, be they capacities for rational thought or capacities for evaluative judgment or capacities for awareness and understanding of one's place in the world. [...] Let us say that to respect persons in the above way is to treat them as opaque» (Carter 2011: 551-2).

the sense that it carries out the action of assuming equality among individuals as necessary form of respect (Ottonelli 2012b: 211).

This idea of “performative respect” of citizens as equally competent citizens should be applied precisely to the action of democratic institutions of ensuring equally enlightened citizenry. Simply put, democratic institutions have the duty to empower the citizenship, to carry out the action of developing citizens’ political competence by transforming the *assumption* of equal competence into the *commitment* to spread political knowledge. Commitment of institutions represents a key passage. Indeed, the strength of individuals to get better and become competent decision-makers is limited. People tend to remain extremely different in their abilities, “from weight lifting to the calculus” as Bernard Williams famously wrote (Williams 1962). This natural impotence makes the assumption of equal competence among individuals significantly onerous to be accepted. Needless to say, democracy is an onerous choice and ultimately depends on individuals’ attitude to accept equality as fundamental value in the public sphere. Nevertheless, emphasis on institution allows to see assumption of equal competence in a different light. Indeed, institutions work differently from individuals in that they make collective efforts to achieve their purpose and, as a result, are much better suited than individuals to undertake difficult enterprises. Consider this difference in epistemic enterprises. Certain epistemic obligations (e.g., grasping and spreading “serviceable truths” for politics) cannot be left in hands individuals alone, only “group agents” measure up. For this reason, equal competence in political action – false in reality – appears as more sustainable premise if institutions (and not the citizens) take this commitment as an obligation. Doan, for instance, guards against a kind of epistemic individualism, which overestimates individuals’ capacity to carry out epistemic endeavors (Doan 2016: 538). In this view, Schwenkenbecher urges the importance of comprehending «the collective character of some of our epistemic obligations» (Schwenkenbecher 2021: 12). She asserts that «it seems reasonable to assume that so-called *group agents* (including states, corporations, governmental and

NGOs) have obligations towards maintaining and expanding our joint epistemic resources» (Schwenkenbecher 2021: 12).

In line with Doan's and Schwenkenbecher's intuitions, "enlightened proceduralism" defends the normative task of institutions, not of individuals, to set the stage for citizens' enlightened participation in political decision-making. Institutions' commitment compensates the *de facto* impossibility to achieve equal political competence among citizens. Even more, institutions' commitment to empower the demos makes clear that the epistemic failures of individual citizens are absorbed by a robust infrastructure. In this way, political agency of citizens as equal competent decision-makers remains a fascinating and sustainable ideal because not constrained to individual flaws. Surely, institutions themselves make errors. Nevertheless, what counts is their capacity to personify a constant struggle towards an enlightened and equal way of taking political decisions.

Here again, democracy appears an "enlightened procedure" since it relies on people capacity to understand the world. Moreover, democracy embodies an "enlightened procedure" because it commits itself to empower citizens as political decision-makers. Democracy entails therefore the requirement that each citizen is not only included in the decision-making as competent decision-maker and, equally important, that equal capacity among citizens to decide embodies a permanent commitment of democratic institutions

## **Conclusion**

The chapter tried to place the episteme in a proceduralist perspective of democracy, which recognizes disagreement and the consequent pluralism of values as indelible traits of democratic society. Furthermore, an attempt was made to defend the role of political knowledge by detaching it from any appeal to the performance of decision-makers and, with it, to the pursuit of right decisions. The reflection on episteme as political knowledge of the *facts* of politics or, in other words, knowledge of the



*background elements* of public decisions or again, as “*serviceable truths*” has tried to enrich the procedural paradigm with a purely epistemic component. To do this, it has been stressed on several occasions that episteme does not impose deference to dogmatic truths but, rather, encourages convergence on modest background information that citizens can easily recognize once insouciance is defeated. In any case, contrary to what was theorized by the epistemic reductionism of the epistocrats, political knowledge does not prevent disagreement and does not imply any obedience to the conclusions of any “knowers”. Exactly on the contrary, political knowledge serves deliberation, debate, and even the stark contrast between the different perspectives existing in the democratic arena. This climate of dispute is not undermined by enlightened proceduralism which aims to anchor public deliberation to some landmarks on the rules of the game, the cruxes of public debate and political players. The need to enrich proceduralism with the enlightenment of episteme derives from the given characterization of decision-making and the political agency of citizens. Referring to the analyzes of the epistocrats and the conclusions of chapter 2, the structural epistemic nuance of any decision-making (including, of course, the political one) was highlighted. Any decision, especially political ones, brings with it a cognitive commitment to fulfill. The problem is not that, refusing to acquire political ignorance, people make bad decisions. Very differently, the point is that giving no weight to political ignorance people distort the nature of decision-making and, with that, their role of democratic decision-maker. The focus on the episteme, therefore, is not motivated by the instrumentalist obsession with forming *good* decision-makers, but by the procedural concern of tying citizenship to the role that democracy provides for it. For this reason, the analysis of decision-making is connected to that of the political agency of citizens. Popular sovereignty is the institutional translation of confidence in the ability of individuals to understand, evaluate and act. Democracy presupposes agents, epistemic and moral, it is based on their involvement in the first person. Democracy cannot betray this expectation because this expectation is democracy.

The chapter ended by introducing the reflection that will engage the next chapter: the role of institutions in guaranteeing people an epistemic empowerment. Democracy, we will try to show, not only assumes people's ability to understand but encourages it and could encourage it even more.

## Chapter 4

### Epistemic Empowerment, Rights, Institutions

«Killing one tyrant only makes way for worse, unless the people have sense, spirit and honesty enough to establish and support a constitution guarded at all points against the tyranny of the one, the few, and the many. Let it be the study, therefore, of lawgivers and philosophers, to enlighten the people's understandings and improve their morals, by good and general education; to enable them to comprehend the scheme of government, and to know upon what points their liberties depend; to dissipate those vulgar prejudices and popular superstitions that oppose themselves to good government; and to teach them that obedience to the laws is as indispensable in them as in lords and kings»

John Adams

«Enlightenment should also be enjoyable»

Saul Bellow

The chapter tries to give an institutional face to the paradigm of enlightened proceduralism. Returning to the analysis of chapter 3, we shall try to show how democracy rests on precise value assumptions and focuses on the participation of the people coupling the protection from authoritarian interferences with attention towards the way people play their role. According to enlightened proceduralism's interpretation, democracy cannot rely on the centrality of people and, at the same time, deny that their littleness in dealing with politics represents a problem to be addressed. In other words, centrality of the people not only describes the amount of power held by the people but also their ability to exercise it. In this regard, being democratic cannot

be limited to guaranteeing a substantial space of power for the people, rather, it is about the question of how that power will be exercised. As seen at the end of chapter 3, democracy assumes a certain political agency of citizenship by conferring equal political power to citizens, *as if* all were equally capable of understanding and deciding. The meaning of this premise finds its fulfillment in the commitment of the institutions to bridge the differences of competence between individuals and become themselves support of demos' political/epistemic agency.

The chapter is divided into four sections. The first section reconnects to the analysis of chapter 3 and returns to the centrality of the people and the epistemic side of decision-making as characterizing aspects of democracy. This reconnects democracy as a philosophy of government to democracy as philosophy of citizenship and encourages to concentrate on institutional design to better protect and realize people's political agency. The second section shows how the empowerment of citizens is an obligation *already* incorporated by liberal democracy. The section focuses on the role of liberty and social rights (in particular the right to education). Liberty rights as a permanent barrier against harmful consequences in the exercise of one's epistemic agency pave the way to the development of that epistemic agency, both through the exposure to several viewpoints and the possibility of engaging in trials and errors process of understanding. On the other hand, rights of citizens correspond to obligations and costs for the state, which intervenes in the formation of the demos by guaranteeing, as said, public grant services and support in several areas. In the case of epistemic empowerment of citizens, a pivotal part is played by the right to education and the resulting obligation for the State to provide publicly financed schooling. In this case, social rights are at work as institutional means intended to empower the people as epistemic agent in political process. The third section looks at possible developments in the form of the democratic process and discusses two possible remedies to make democracy more capable of empowering the epistemic agency of individuals. The first is compulsory voting. Compulsory voting would refine the democratic procedure and make it more like an enlightened procedure, as citizens are encouraged to be aware of

their role in the procedure itself by participating in it. Furthermore, compulsory voting represents a stimulus to overcome political insouciance and orient citizens towards political knowledge. The second remedy is the “visible hand” strategy, that is, the creation of independent experts’ agencies that would act in the public debate as the institutional device to spread serviceable truths. The combination of mandatory participation and the creation of institutions charged with making the factual problems underlying political choices understandable would be a possible institutional translation of the theoretical ideal of enlightened proceduralism. Finally, the fourth section anticipates and responds to criticisms on the substance and method of the proposed institutional design. In particular, the final pages will try to highlight the procedural nature of the measures at issue and respond to the accusations of “elitism”.

## **1. Empowering the Citizens**

### *Institutionalizing Citizens’ Epistemic Empowerment*

Final section of the third chapter has focused on political agency and performative respect among democratic citizens. The analysis has attempted to present the connection between proposed interpretation of respect and the role of democratic institutions as “group agent” that should take responsibility for providing citizenship political knowledge. Briefly, democratic institutions retain the epistemic obligation to provide the demos the epistemic empowerment to act as political decision-maker, that is, to support, facilitate, and encourage citizens’ effort to acquire political knowledge. Recalling the concept of political knowledge as defined in second chapter, institutions bear the burden of spreading information so that citizenship manage to overcome epistemic insouciance towards politics and sidestep ignorance about rules of the game, cruxes of the public debate and political actors. It is worth noting that this kind of empowerment is aimed at providing a modest level of political knowledge, to overcome ignorance without dispelling the doubts and dilemmas implied by public

stakes. The reach and the form of this empowerment shall be later spelled out in the analysis.

The point of *institutionalizing* the epistemic empowerment of the citizens directly stems from the interpretation of democracy as enlightened proceduralism. In that reading, democracy as a system of government and decision-making technique is legitimated by four pillars, as a table which is sustained by four legs. Liberty, equality, and protection of disagreement are the first three legs, already recognized by procedural theorists (see chapter 3, section 3). Last key-principle of democracy is the enlightenment of episteme, understood as knowledge about background elements of decision-making which “serviceable truth” provides (see chapter 3, section 4). The focus on the forms and functions of democratic institutions and their capacity to empower the demos represents an attempt to “complicate” democratic framework, that is, reconnecting institutional design to the grounding values of democratic practice.<sup>78</sup> In other words, theoretical and normative analysis developed in the field of normative democratic theory inevitably encourages to imagine a consequent translation of enlightened proceduralism in the field of institutional design. Indeed, as Pintore remarked, normative accounts of democracy are “unilateral” and “blind” if not confronted with problems of institutional engineering (Pintore 2003: 124).

Democratic institutions or, more generally, the form of the democratic process must undertake to provide the people with an epistemic empowerment, that is, to transform the premise of epistemic equality among citizens into a performative commitment assumed by democracy as a form of government and philosophy of citizenship. With an image, democracy must commit itself to train the players before the game begins. As with the explanation of the rules in games, it is necessary to recognize the need for a minimum epistemic parity among all the people involved in the democratic game

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<sup>78</sup> Rosanvallon recalls Rousseau in introducing the framework of “counter-democracy” and asserts that investigation of counter-democracy derives from the need of *complicating* the idea of democratic citizenship (Rosanvallon 2008: 17-8). Following Rosanvallon, normative democratic theory might challenge institutional arrangement in the light of theoretical considerations.

and, to this end, the need to institutionalize the explanation of its rules as a response to this assumption. It would be illegitimate to claim that the outcome of the game is legitimate if players were not guaranteed the possibility of knowing their role in the game. The game would in fact be a random combination of actions without meaning for the people involved and, accordingly, players would be deprived of their role in creating the outcomes of the game itself. Similarly, democracy is a collective practice which is based on the centrality of citizens and on the epistemic implications of their role. As we have seen, chapter 3 started by stressing centrality of the demos and epistemic side of political decision-making as constitutive trait of democratic framework (see chapter 3, section 1). Furthermore, democracy derives its legitimacy by assuming epistemic equality among people in their action as political decision-makers (see chapter 3, section 4). However, this fundamental theoretical and value premise finds its full fulfillment in the commitment of the institutions to internalize the centrality of citizenship and its epistemic role and, consequently, to ensure that citizenship is able to understand politics, to participate in the political process, to produce political decisions.

Institutions have the burden of disseminating political knowledge and, as we shall see, this task is *already* perceived and carried out by liberal democratic process through rights (see section 2). The intervention of the institutions as a “group agent” capable of spreading the episteme in society is a procedural and not an instrumental concern. As already mentioned, enlightened proceduralism does not advocate the necessity of having epistemically high-performing decision-makers. Rather, it presents and defends the epistemic inclusion of the citizenship as the keystone of the democratic architecture. In this regard, enlightened proceduralism realizes and promotes citizens involvement and political knowledge as this kind of moderate people’s “militancy” is core and identifying trait of democratic framework.

### *Citizen-driven Democracy*

The institutionalization of the epistemic empowerment has reaffirmed pivotal aspects of democratic thinking on which we focused previously, namely, the centrality of the people and epistemic side of decision-making. There can be no democracy without a moderate involvement of the citizenry. In this regard, the axiological and normative perspective of enlightened proceduralism takes shape in the belief that democracy cannot exempt itself from being “citizen-driven”.

Obviously, such a perspective exposes itself to multiple interpretations and objections. John Stuart Mill, for instance, famously argued that neither the people nor the Parliament can govern. Mills lays out a strict division of labor between controlling government and doing it. The task of running the State necessarily falls to more restricted, focused, and competent gatherings. In short, the idea that the people or a Parliament, that is, a wide and uneven multitude, can be directive in the affairs of the State clumsily neglects the “moods”, delays and splits typical of large gatherings, characteristics that make their deliberations scarcely executive.<sup>79</sup>

Contrary to this interpretation of “citizen-driven democracy”, the empowerment of the people advocated by enlightened proceduralism does not evoke a model of governance or administration but, rather, a systemic approach to the organization of a democratic institutions. The insistence on empowerment as an institutional urgency identifies the impossibility for democracy as a form of government to center political power on the people without considering the issue of their political and epistemic agency. According to enlightened proceduralism’s interpretation, democracy cannot rely on the centrality of people and, at the same time, deny that their *littleness* in dealing with politics does not represent a problem to be addressed. In this regard, being democratic cannot be limited to guaranteeing a substantial space of power for the people, rather, it is about the question of how that power will be exercised. A similar aspect was clearly expressed by Tocqueville.

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<sup>79</sup> See Mill (2010: Chapters 5 and 14).



In vain will you charge these same citizens, whom you have made so dependent on the central power, with choosing from time to time the representatives of this power; this use so important, but so short and so rare, of their free will, will not prevent them from losing little by little the ability to think, to feel and to act by themselves, and from thus falling gradually below the level of humanity. (Tocqueville 2012: 1259)

Elections alone are too “rare”, according to Tocqueville, to prove that democratic institutions are really centered on people’s participation and truly receptive of their free will. This intuition can be reformulated in more general terms by asserting that periodic elections do not explicit the necessity for democratic states that people maintain, in Tocqueville’s terms, their “ability to think”. In other words, the point made by Tocqueville captures the impossibility to realize democracy as philosophy of government, if it is not supported by the development of democracy as philosophy of citizenship. Again, the clear risk emerging here is the recalcitrance to conflate the ideal of democratic citizenship with the shape of democratic institutions. As Manent put it in his comment of Tocqueville’s words, «the crucial problem of democratic societies then concerns a type of man, a citizen, who will use his constitutional rights and exercise his liberties or who will let himself be deprived of them» (Manent 1996: 52). Accordingly, centrality of the people not only describes the amount of power held by the people but also their ability to exercise it. Tocqueville, for instance, feared the potential effects of individualism on people’s awareness and vigilance on public affairs. Bellah characterizes Tocqueville’s worries as follows.

Associational life, in Tocqueville’s thinking, is the best bulwark against the condition he feared most: the mass society of mutually antagonistic individuals, easy prey to despotism. (Bellah 1996: 38)

Tocqueville was interested in whatever filled the gulf between the individual and the state with active citizen participation: the family, religious bodies, and associations of all sorts. These he saw as moderating the isolating tendencies of private ambition on the one hand and limiting the despotic proclivities of government on the other. (Bellah 1996: 212)

Democrats' disinterest about the quality of people's participation is usually interpreted as respect towards citizens' ideas and values. However, thematizing the way people participate and arguing that it constitutes central aspect of democratic life does not imply disrespect or, even, intrusion in people's exercise of free will. Following Tocqueville's line of reasoning, people's "ability to think" is the bulwark against democracy as façade for despotism of ruling class, with majority of people silent, obedient, other-directed.

Reflection on epistemic empowerment represents the attempt to boost political deliberation without questioning people's liberty. As we have tried to clarify, enlightened proceduralism is not aimed at encouraging people to think in a certain way, that, to create *the enlightened approach* to politics. The point, if anything, is to make sure that democratic institutions do not remain indifferent to the political ignorance of the demos and to make sure that the background elements of politics are clear so that politics itself becomes more understandable, accessible, and debatable to the people. Focus on episteme portrays understanding as part of decision-making, epistemic agency as constitutive side of political agency, and cognitive care as premise for exercising political will. Even if episteme alone just represents a first and basic enhancement of people's "ability to think" about politics, it nonetheless encourages the demos to win insouciance towards the political stakes.

Flinders returns on the pivotal part played by the citizenship by stigmatizing their passivity in democratic process and clearly underlines the epistemic shade of Tocqueville's "ability to think". «If politics is viewed as failing, the challenge lies in promoting understanding, education, and communication. It also lies in turning passive consumers into active citizens and in understanding that democratic politics is not a spectator sport» (Flinders 2012: XV). Flinders once again emphasizes an aspect on which Dahl focused: participation in politics implies a certain degree of enlightenment. To overcome passivity, Flinders insists on the need to leverage understanding of democratic politics. Admittedly, this firstly depends on citizens availability not to

disregard the epistemic responsibility they have as political decision-makers. Not fortuitously, Flinders urges the impossibility of considering democracy a “spectator sport”. Rather, as seen above, democracy entails an active and vital part of democratic citizens as protagonist “players” which must be supported in their “understanding” of politics. «Democracy, in its true and active form, rests upon the existence of active citizens, not passive critics, but my sense is that too many people possess a highly developed sense of their rights but an underdeveloped sense of their responsibilities» (Flinders 2012: 39). However, Flinders offers a second, decisive, contribution. In fact, in his reading, «democracy is essentially a two-way relationship» (Flinders 2012: 43) where both people and the State operate for the future and overlap in their actions. In discussing the kind of people’s engagement democracy requires, Flinders point us in the direction of institutional commitment.

In order to close the gap that has apparently emerged between the governors and the governed, however, we need to develop a fairly candid and blunt account of what democratic engagement can and cannot provide and we need to be honest about the way in which democratic processes encourage politicians to promise more than they can deliver. *We also need fresh tools and bold new ways of understanding the political world* [my emphasis] as it is currently unfolding. (Flinders 2012: 56)

The philosophy of democratic citizenship is both the fruit of bottom-up and top-down commitment, that is, citizens’ availability to engage with politics and state’s responsibility in enabling the demos to be central subject of democratic process. Flinders’ contribution evokes the institutions’ role and makes clear that the empowerment of the citizens is not just the outcome of their dedication but represents a goal that democracy must systematically strive for.

## **2. Rights and Epistemic Empowerment**

### *Rights and Political Agency*

Democracy as an enlightened procedure is partly already realized in liberal democracy. Indeed, the democratic paradigm internalizes the need to provide citizens with epistemic empowerment through rights. Rights embody an answer of democratic paradigm to the necessity of empowering citizens as key actor in democratic process. The inquiry about citizens' epistemic empowerment and shape of democratic institutions must necessarily take rights into account. Rights are a fundamental, even if not sufficient, institutional vector to develop democratic people as political agents.

In fact, Democracy as form of government reverberates a precise conception of citizens' political agency, which enlightened proceduralism tried to characterize starting from the features of decision-making. In terms of government, this perspective inspires an equal, free, pluralistic, and "truth oriented" (in the sense discussed in chapter 3) form of decision-making. In a nutshell, democracy is shaped by the attempt of acknowledging, protecting, and realizing people's moral and epistemic nature. To put another way, democratic framework struggles to realize Darwall's idea of "recognition respect", that is, to realize the dignity descending from people's power to choose freely and rationally (Darwall 1977).

Democracy offers a political infrastructure to the epistemic-moral dynamism of individuals, giving them institutional spaces to reverberate their qualities as political decision-makers. Ottonelli characterizes democratic organization of society as the recognition of political agency, that is, citizens' potential to act as decision-makers.

[I]f we want to account for the role of the participants in the democratic process as decision makers, such meaningful decisions must come through institutional procedures that are responsive to their individual choices (votes). [...] Majority rule is essential to democracy, while a random decision procedure such as coin-tossing is not, because majority rule, unlike selection by lot, responds to how each and every citizen decides to cast their vote. Democracy [...] gives citizens the power and duty to directly participate in the production of meaningful collective decisions, by casting votes in a way that aims at a given result, in conjunction, of course, with the votes of all the other participants. (Ottonelli 2019: 4-5)

Ottonelli's reconstruction dwells on voting as core element of democratic process and characterizes democracy's receptivity to the inputs people give about public issues. Aggregation of individual preferences which occurs in democracy does not simply represent a collection of random utterances. Rather, voting constitutes the institutional device which entitles individuals to act as decision-maker and enable the citizens to coordinate each other in the expression of their say about what to do. However, democratic process is not only characterized by elections and citizens political agency is recognized and expressed by a set of rights. Of course, the role played by rights within democratic practice cannot be extensively investigated here. Following Bobbio, it is enough to concede a strict correlation between democracy and freedom rights and, moreover, to argue that democracy safeguards rights, whereas rights make democracy properly work (Bobbio 1985: 47). As Ottonelli remarks in describing people's involvement in democratic politics, «[a]ll the forms of action that manifest this commitment to a political cause are made possible and protected by democratic rights, such as the right of association, freedom of speech and press, freedom of assembly, and the right to strike» (Ottonelli 2018: 394).<sup>80</sup> In this view, rights track spaces of freedom for citizens' action and thus contribute to acknowledge their political agency. Ottonelli's investigation helps us to figure out three cardinal dimensions of citizens political agency, which radically characterizes human decision-making in contrast to random or pure instinctiveness. Distinctive traits of people's decision-making are rationality, reasonableness, and prudence (Ottonelli 2012a: 193-8) These terms are keystones in political and legal philosophy, and we shall only spotlight key features of such concepts. First, political participation mirrors people's way to be "rational", that is, their capability to access what is in their interests to do and what makes them happy. Rationality is thus understood here as the power to "create ends", to affirm, for

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<sup>80</sup> Again, rights at stake are "freedom rights". «It is important to note that all these are freedom rights, which leave up to citizens whether, when, and how to exercise the forms of political action the rights cover» (Ottonelli 2018: 394).

instance, the value of tradition, secularism, social justice, and so on. On the other hand, reasonableness refers to citizens' faculty to deliberate together, to ponder different arguments, to take a decision, and be critic/supporter of decisions taken. In this regard, citizens are not only capable of making claims and express interests, but they have also the means to mediate among different demands, values, interests.<sup>81</sup> Recalling previous analysis about the nature of political decision-making (see chapter 3, section 4), "foreground elements" in political decision-making sound here as an umbrella term for both rationality and reasonableness. As seen above, citizens as political agents pour into decision-making process their moral beliefs, experiences, and sensibility both about the ends of politics and relations with other decision-makers. Of course, both rationality and reasonableness include epistemic aspects about decisions to be taken. However, episteme as knowledge about "background elements" of democratic process is largely contained in the third component of political agency, which is defined by Ottonelli as prudence. By prudence is meant citizens' political "know-how" to achieve ends and act strategically so that one's desiderata and actions are consistent with one another. Prudence is, so to speak, the pragmatic counterpart of people's inner deliberation and incorporates the cognitive elements to determine the appropriate action in the political arena.

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<sup>81</sup> In the footsteps of Rawls's philosophy, Liveriero tracks a similar distinction between rationality and reasonableness. In her reading, rationality is based on self-centered vision of the world, whereas reasonableness backs on comprehension of others and cooperation with them. «When distinguishing between rational and reasonable, Rawls (1993, 48–58) claims that rational agents are able to pursue a conception of the good thanks to a self-centred perspective that very often (but not necessarily always) employs a means-ends way of reasoning. A reasonable person, instead, is aware of the normative constraint of reciprocity and is ready to accept a public reason constraint that turns out to be extremely pressing once the fact of pluralism is assumed to be a stable epistemic circumstance of political societies. The fundamental line of distinction between rationality and reasonableness is that an agent might be rational even in the case where she is the only person alive on Earth, whereas, for being reasonable, she needs at least a second person with whom to establish a relation of mutual reciprocity» (Liveriero 2020: 4).

Democracy recognizes and affirms all these three aspects of citizens' political agency through voting process but, very importantly, also through liberty rights such as right of association, freedom of speech and press, freedom of assembly, and the right to strike. In the case of rationality and reasonableness as crucial dimensions of political agency, rights are the fundamental means through which democracy respect and valorizes people's moral identity. This point is clearly explained by Waldron.

[I]t is essential to the idea of rights that persons are moral agents who can be trusted with the responsibility to direct their own lives and to perceive the proper limits placed on their own freedom of action by respect for the similar efforts of others. (Waldron 1999: 14).

Likewise, rights allow citizenship the "space" to resort to prudence and act in society according to their understanding of circumstances, problems, stakes of political situation. Ottonelli illustrates this function of rights as follows.

[E]ducating other people to a political faith; organizing campaigns, strikes, and other political events; mobilizing and "calling to arms" other people; demonstrating and other forms of political protest; lobbying; campaigning; fund-raising; and the work done by the rank and file engaged in party mobilisation. These are important ways in which the citizens of a democratic polity act when they fully exercise their political rights [...] I suggest that we think of such activities as the proper space for the exercise of a form of political prudence. When engaging in them, citizens are called to make decisions about the right time, place, and manner of acting in the pursuit of their ideals of justice and the common good, taking into account all the relevant circumstances and facts that will affect the outcomes of their actions. (Ottonelli 2018: 392)

The role of rights is central in democratic theory in relation with the acknowledgement of citizens as bearers of complex political agency through which they act as political decision-makers. The space and freedom to put in place political agency ensured by rights represent the first way to develop human rationality, reasonableness, and prudence. Accordingly, rights represent the first institutional instrument through which democracy guarantees citizens an epistemic empowerment.

## *Freedom Rights and Epistemic Agency*

Through rights, democracy recognizes the political agency of people and, with it, the need to assume a functional form for the formation of decision-makers and the development of their epistemic qualities. The previous paragraph highlighted the crucial role of freedom rights in ensuring that democratic agency can emerge and operate in public decisions in all its shades. Freedom rights as components of contemporary democratic framework represent a first institutional answer to the need of empowering the demos as political decision-maker, especially from an epistemic perspective. As anticipated, by freedom rights are meant the set rights which leave up to citizens to decide the way to act in political context. Among these freedom rights, or “liberal rights”, one can mention the right of association, freedom of speech and press, freedom of assembly, and the right to strike. Christiano argues that the distinctive trait of liberal rights is the protection against the intervention of the State and, more broadly, against any form of external coercion.<sup>82</sup>

Liberal rights mark out a sphere of activity within which a person may act as he pleases without government intervention. Persons acting within that sphere are also to be protected from the interventions of others. In this sphere, each person is to be free from coercion and violence. (Christiano 2008: 133)

Liberal rights are the first way that democratic framework utilizes to place citizens in the position of grasping the episteme and being aware of the background elements in the way they act as decision-makers. Rights as a permanent barrier against harmful consequences in the exercise of one’s epistemic agency pave the way to the

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<sup>82</sup> Christiano’s list of “liberal rights” encompasses many of those mentioned by Ottonelli and includes the “right to conscience”. «Liberal rights such as the rights of freedom of conscience, freedom of association and freedom of speech» (Christiano 2008: 131).



development of that epistemic agency, both through the exposure to several viewpoints and the possibility of engaging in trials and errors process of understanding. In fact, protection against coercion and external oppression fosters the free flow of ideas and information among individuals. This in turn allows citizens to criticize or endorse certain policies or parties, outline arguments in support of a specific perspective, and debate important issues before the public. Furthermore, the safeguard from oppressive and violent form of disagreement provided by rights encourages citizens to cope with political issues, figure out the stakes, square the viable solutions with their moral concerns. Rights thus represent a decisive tool through which citizens can reach a degree of understanding on public questions. The point is clearly summarized by Christiano.

[I]n order to start the process of learning by trial and error one must be able to formulate without fear those beliefs that are most congenial to one. It is important that a person be able to reflect on her own beliefs and have her beliefs responded to by others without fear of interference or discrimination. [...] It is also important for the person to have access to a wide variety of other beliefs against which he can challenge his own views and from which he can learn. [...] The banning of beliefs can therefore be harmful to a person's ability to learn from trial and error even if the person does not agree with them. (Christiano 2008: 139-40)

Reflecting on the liberty rights, Anderson concentrates more strictly on free speech and freedom of the press to emphasize the beneficial effects for the demos in relation to the need of its epistemic empowerment. «Democratic norms of free discourse, dissent, feedback, and accountability function to ensure collective, experimentally based learning from the diverse experiences of different knowers» (Anderson 2006: 8). Moreover, Anderson argues that those rights impact the enhancement of citizens' political and epistemic agency as constitutive feature of democracy, that is, permanent trait of its institutional arrangement. «A free press, public discussion and hence mutual influence prior to voting are constitutive, not accidental features of democracy. Without access to public fora for sharing information and opinions beyond their

immediate knowledge, voters are uninformed and often helpless» (Anderson 2006: 11). So, democratic openness to new and different information ensured by rights is expected to perform, among others, a *didactic* function in the way people understand reality. Very importantly, as Anderson underlines, those liberties are *constitutive features* of democratic framework. So, simply put, rights are part of democracy's institutional arrangement and embody a systemic answer of democracy to the problem of citizens' epistemic empowerment. Without such an epistemic empowerment, Anderson concedes, citizens can hardly contribute to political decision-making.

The protection against external coercion ensured by freedom rights maintains people at the heart of democratic decision-making and offers them the guarantees that ideas and worldviews can be developed and manifested. Accordingly, freedom rights as element of democratic system fulfill the need to spread political knowledge among the people. This function of liberty rights in democratic framework has been strongly emphasized by famous Brandeis' concurring opinion (joined by justice Holmes) in *Whitney v. California*. Brandeis held citizens cannot really take part in governing process unless they can discuss and criticize governmental policy fully and without fear.

Those who won our independence believed that the final end of the State was to make men free to develop their faculties, and that, in its government, the deliberative forces should prevail over the arbitrary. They valued liberty both as an end, and as a means. [...] They believed that *freedom to think as you will and to speak as you think are means indispensable to the discovery and spread of political truth*; that, without free speech and assembly, discussion would be futile. (Whitney v. California, 274 U.S. 357 1927; my emphasis)

The reference to these words of United States Supreme Court words and the American independence spirit marks out a typical trait of American culture about the production and dissemination of knowledge in society which partly contrasted with European sensibility. As Burke argued in his investigation about social history of knowledge, in United States, the liberation of most constraints on public expression together with the

trust in private self-improvement has been always considered the main way to create and spread knowledge in society (Burke 2012: 222). Conversely, European approach has tended to be more statist and characterized by the direct intervention of the Government which put energy and resources into the sponsorship of knowledge creation and dissemination.

On this difference we will return later by discussing a different approach to the epistemic empowerment of the people provided by democratic institution in the form of state's intervention. However, the critical point connected to the role of rights is their function in the development of citizens' knowledge about politics and the typical strategy through which they pursue this end. Rights value citizens political and epistemic agency by relying on their own initiative to grasp "truths" based on the solid conviction that democracy is a safe place for such a cognitive enterprise. In this regard, rights embody a first way for democratic institutions for valorizing episteme as a cardinal element of democratic setting. Recalling Mill, liberal rights as instruments for developing citizens' capacity to decide according to "truths" reaffirms the liberal faith in the power of individuals to look after themselves. «Each is the proper guardian of his own health, whether bodily, or mental or spiritual» (Mill 2009: 24).

### *Right to Education, Civic Education, and Epistemic Agency*

A democracy of freedom rights, or a liberal democracy, cannot depend on the guarantee of liberties in a way that relies on citizens' individualism alone. The association between democracy and liberalism, in fact, should not be reduced to the protection of individual dynamism warranted by freedom rights. Rather, rights empower the demos by ensuring them a set of material benefits. In this sense, the link between democracy and rights has led to the birth and reinforcement of "welfare state". The role of the state can be conceptually explained by considering the notion of "dependency" in liberal conception of freedom.

Individual freedom, however defined, cannot mean freedom from all forms of dependency. [...] Liberal theory should therefore distinguish freedom, which is desirable, from nondependence, which is impossible. Liberty, rightly conceived, does not require a lack of dependence on government; on contrary, affirmative government provides the preconditions of liberty. (Holmes and Sunstein 1999: 204)

Holmes and Sunstein insist that the rights of citizens correspond to obligations and costs for the state, which intervenes in the formation of the citizenship by guaranteeing, as said, public grant services and support in several areas.

In the case of epistemic empowerment of citizens, a pivotal part is played by the right to education and the resulting obligation for the State to provide publicly financed schooling. In this case, social rights, and not liberty rights, are at work as institutional means intended to empower the people as epistemic agent in political process. As Holmes illustrated, liberal state cannot be confined in liberty rights: this can be rapidly seen when one confronts with the right to education. «[M]any detractors of liberalism assume that the classical liberal state was designed to protect freedom without providing resources. The plausibility of this charge, too, disintegrates upon inspection. The liberal state provides publicly financed schooling to all, for instance» (Holmes 1995: 12).

Right to education is crucial for analyzing the empowerment of democratic citizenship provided by democratic institutions. In fact, liberal rights nourish society through more comprehensive contribution than assisting in the goal of implementing an enlightened political participation. The political debate that is enabled by liberal rights may simply take for granted citizens' knowledge of the background conditions of politics and may be exclusively intended to generate support for one or another political faction. Conversely, the right to education appears to be strongly connected to the enhancement of citizens' capacity to understand politics and, thus, to the development of citizens' epistemic agency. This right is codified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 26.

Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups.

The aim of asserting this right is to enhance human dignity by ensuring to every person the opportunity to develop knowledge, skills, and a moral code to subsist. Tomaševski notes that right to education «operates as a multiplier, enhancing the enjoyment of all individual rights and freedom» (Tomaševski 2001: 10). Of course, empowerment of education goes far beyond the field of politics. Education feeds human developing across the board by increasing critical sense, growing the knowledge of reality from the perspectives of several disciplines, offering the cognitive tools to develop a proper worldview. In a nutshell, education is a key element in the formation of individuals in all their moral, professional, and private dimensions. Nonetheless, among the purposes of the right to education, the task of providing citizens civic competence emerges, which is directly connected with the epistemic empowerment considered here.

Pratte reports three possible meanings for civic competence (or civic education): instilling national loyalty or patriotism; creating a civic understanding of rights and obligations and developing civic skills; developing virtuous citizens with a deeply felt sense of public responsibility (Pratte 1988: 304). Jamieson analytically classifies the foundational notions of the role civic empowerment in school, which include learning the basic rules of a constitution, rights protected by the constitution, meaning of civic celebrations (e.g., the Fourth of July in the U.S.), idea of separation of power, and what differentiates a liberal from a conservative in current political debates (Jamieson 2013: 76). This important mission can be accomplished by school through different strategies and priorities: traditional teaching, active learning, video teaching, and maintenance of an open classroom climate (Gainous and Martens 2013: 956). Civic education makes evident the way that democracy takes and valorizes the epistemic side of decision-

making by emphasizing the presence of facts and key information to be considered in political deliberation.

Together with the possibility of personal empowerment provided liberal rights, right to education constitutes a further mean to empower citizens as epistemic agent in political process. Despite embracing different strategies, liberal and social rights make “serviceable truths” circulate in society. The dissemination of information, values, and opinions that is ensured by rights proves the receptivity of the liberal democratic framework to the necessity of building up a citizen-driven system of government by empowering its demos.

From an empirical perspective, many studies have stressed the positive influence of civic education on citizens’ capacity to understand politics and engage with its process (Campbell 2007; Feldman, Pasek, Romer, and Jamieson 2007; Gainous and Martens 2012). However, many problems remain. Here, we have only mentioned a crucial remark that Mallon made regarding the dependence of right to education and its effectiveness through pre-existing social problems. Mallon noted that «it may be necessary to address existing social, economic and cultural inequalities, political instability, the need for peace- building and alleviation of conflict» (Mallon 2020: 185). This remark relates to any right, but it emphasizes a crucial point in the relationship between politics and citizens’ epistemic capacity, that is, the possibility of implementing a strategy that does not depend on the results of institutions’ work but directly on descending from the ways in which institutions take political decisions.

### **3. Institutions and Epistemic Empowerment**

#### *Enlightened Proceduralism and Institutional Design*

Analysis has urged the necessity that a philosophy of democratic government and philosophy of democratic citizenship walk abreast. One cannot be given without the other. Reflection on liberal and social rights, particularly the right to education, has

tried to show how democracy *already* sees the necessity to form the demos as principal actor of decision-making process. This section tries to figure out the way democracy *could* consider the problem to advance the epistemic development of citizens political agency through the form of institutions. Recalling Rosanvallon's image, the aim of this section is then to complicate decision-making procedure so that episteme can work and be seen as an inspiring value of democracy together with equality, liberty, and pluralism. In this regard, the goal of this section is to put the normative ideal of democracy as enlightened proceduralism in the context of real democratic practice and speculate about the possible strategies to give democratic institutions the shape of an enlightened procedure. Simply put, the inquiry attempts to figure out how to institutionalize a theoretical point, more precisely, how to translate the normative paradigm of enlightened proceduralism into an innovation of democratic practice. In terms of institutional engineering, the purpose is to imagine an "implementation theory", that is, to design a form of democracy that encourages people to cope with political information with respect to their role of political agent.<sup>83</sup>

Democracy as enlightened proceduralism assumes and valorizes the epistemic capacity of citizens to act in the political environment. As seen, such an assumption anticipates the commitment of democratic institutions as "group agent" to tackle political ignorance and affirm the political agency of citizens. On this point, Dahl observes the following with concern.

[A]dvocates of democracy must face the daunting truth that the practices and institutions of modern democratic countries seem to be failing to produce even the "good-enough" citizens envisioned in this formulation. [...] Unless we are prepared to accept a severe attenuation of

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<sup>83</sup> Van Parijs defines implementation theory as the «the attempt to design pay-off structures in such a way that the individual agents' behaviour will generate the socially preferred outcomes» (Van Parijs 2011: 38). As clarified, enlightened proceduralism did not advocate any preferred outcome. Rather, it is about the defense of epistemic empowerment in democratic practice. Therefore, the goal is to implement a process that spread knowledge among the citizens.

democracy, we need to discover genuinely feasible ways of raising citizen competence. (Dahl 1992: 48).

The focus on democratic institutions is quite significant and appears several times in Dahl's reflection. In different form, the problem of democratic citizenship as critical factor of democratic government reappears. Democracy goes hand in hand with democratic demos or, as said, democracy as philosophy of government is strictly connected with democracy as philosophy of citizenship. Particularly, development of political agency depends on the enhancement of epistemic agency. Indeed, Dahl eloquently wonders, "is it possible to develop institutions that can provide citizens with better access to reliable and relevant information?" (Dahl 1992: 52). From Dahl's perspective, the present form of democracy based on rights and elections is incapable to provide empowerment at issue, because of weak deliberation and inadequate involvement of experts: "here again, the institutions of democratic countries seem to me inadequate" (Dahl 1992: 53).

Once again, Dahl provides a peculiar perspective for investigating the problem of the episteme within democratic proceduralism. Together with the rights allotted, the form of institutions constitutes a critical line of inquiry for outlining constructive contributions to valorize episteme in democratic theory. In fact, institutions are not only a significant limit to the formative capacity of contemporary democracy but are also the decisive place to deal with citizens' political knowledge.

In arguing that changes in the scale of political life, the greater complexity of public affairs, and new forms of communication have rendered conventional solutions to the problem of citizen competence unsatisfactory, I do not mean to suggest that familiar institutions for promoting civic competence must be replaced altogether. Rather, I believe that these old methods need to be supplemented with new institutions and techniques. (Dahl 1992: 54).

Dahl is not alone in suggesting the centrality of institutions from this peculiar perspective. Christiano sets out a similar argument. «One possible solution to the



problem of worse off people being less well informed is to design institutions that help them get better informed. [...] What is needed are institutions that disseminate what Downs calls 'free information' to ordinary people» (Christiano 2016).

The objective of the new democratic institutions is to enhance the epistemic agency of citizens, to arouse a critical sense in the evaluation of politics and to enrich collective debate by nourishing the “deliberation within” of the citizens.<sup>84</sup> Of course, the institutional strategy to feed political agency of citizens with “serviceable truths” is linked to the clear awareness, already shown, that epistemic empowerment does not cancel out the risks of biased or immoral participation (see chapter 2, section 4). Nonetheless, the pursuit of evil ends would become more challenging if the implications are made manifest and easily understandable by the work of the institutions. Moreover, epistemically empowered citizenry would have the informational resources to review previously supported moral positions based on false factual beliefs.<sup>85</sup> In any case, the possible unsucces to effectively improving the epistemic agency and, thus, political agency of the people must be explained by the careful effort to strike the balance between the enhancement of episteme and the respect for equality, freedom, and pluralism. From this perspective, the push coming from institutions towards the abovementioned enlightenment in no way must deprive citizens of the freedom to remain ignorant or irrational.

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<sup>84</sup> Goodin characterizes “deliberation within” as key aspect of democratic practice. «[D]eliberation also has a familiar ‘internal-reflective’ aspect to it. Deliberation consists in the weighing of reasons for and against a course of action. In that sense, it can and ultimately must take place within the head of each individual» (Goodin 2003: 169).

<sup>85</sup> Influence of epistemic on moral preference is well captured by Mounk in his analysis of populism. First, Mounk refers to Jan-Werner Müller’s words, who claims that populist demand a “moral monopoly of representation”. Interestingly, once they have achieved the power, populist’ first urgency is to take the control or discredit journals, foundations, trade unions, think tanks, religious associations, and other nongovernmental organizations which oppose their worldview. So, very simply, populist understand the advancement of their moral reputation as crucially linked to the information spread by those epistemic agencies. See Mounk (2018: 45-6).

The aim of the next two sections is to give shape to this institutional commitment in forming the citizenship. Before entering in the institutionalization of enlightened proceduralism, a caveat is worth formulating. As Sintomer remarks, the task of normative political reflection is to propose a compass, that is, a direction to point in investing energy and time to reform society.<sup>86</sup> Following Sintomer, the proposals we will discuss attempt to put a face to the conceptual pattern of enlightened proceduralism. However, as a matter of facts, the transformation of a concept into an institutional arrangement implies empirical evaluations that goes beyond the purposes of this theoretical investigation and requires the contributions of other disciplines. Consequently, there is no claim to exclude that enlightened proceduralism as a normative interpretation of democracy may be better realized by institutional devices which are not considered here.

### *Compulsory Voting*

Democracy should implement compulsory voting to provide people an empowerment to act as political decision-makers. The adoption of compulsory voting can be characterized as the commitment of democratic institutions to enhance people political and epistemic agency and, accordingly, as one of the possible “genuinely feasible ways” advocated by Dahl to renovate democratic practice. By compulsory voting is meant the requirement for eligible citizens to vote in elections under penalty of low financial fines.<sup>87</sup> This measure is currently used for national elections in 27 countries

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<sup>86</sup> «The purpose of political theory is or should be to offer a compass that helps citizens to find a path to face the actual political challenges and to proceed in their experiences» (Sintomer 2016: 231-2).

<sup>87</sup> The minimality of the fines is identifiable from a comparative point of view: it ranges from 20 Australian dollars (Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918; Criminal Code Act 1995, section 245) to 50 Argentine pesos (Código Electoral - No emisión del voto) and 500 Uruguayan pesos (Ley N° 13.882, art. 10). In Brazil the fine are equivalent to the 3-10% of the minimum wage (Lei n. 4.737, de 15 de julho de 1965, Institui o Código Eleitoral, art. 7), in Ecuador the 10% (Ley organica electoral y de

or federal subunits, such as Australia, Belgium, Argentina, and Brazil (Singh 2021: 19). There is a vibrant academic discussion about the compulsory voting and its effect on democracy. It is here useful to underscore two empirical traits of compulsory voting before defending it as institutional arrangement that can bring democracy closer to an enlightened procedure.

A first aspect is empirical. Compulsory voting does increase the electoral turnout. There is no doubt about this effect of compulsory voting, which is broadly recognized in the literature (Lijphart 1997 and 1998, Engelen 2007, Birch 2009, Lever 2010). Collecting empirical data on compulsory voting, Engelen clearly emphasized the trend of turnout, both taking into account cross-country comparisons and within-country comparisons.

A first method is to compare turnout levels in countries where voting is compulsory with those where it is not. Such *cross-country comparisons* show that average turnout in the first is about 10 to 15 percentage points higher than the second [...]. The only two member states that have compulsory voting in the European Union had turnout levels of about 90% in the 2004 European Parliament election, which sharply contrasts with the average of 45.6%. [...] A second method therefore, looks at a country that has introduced or abolished compulsory voting at some moment in time. Making sure all circumstances remain the same, such *within-country comparisons* are better suited to singling out its effect. Although the available data is limited, it leaves no room for doubt: wherever it is introduced, compulsory voting raises turnout. Completely analogously, the data show that turnout always drops when such laws are abolished. (Engelen 2007: 26-7)

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organizaciones políticas de la República del Ecuador, art. 292), in Peru the 5% of the *Unidad Impositiva Tributaria* (Ley Orgánica de Elecciones, Ley N° 26859, Art. 251). Sanctions other than the simple financial fine might arise only in response to a repeated refusal to pay the first sanction. The modest amount of such pecuniary sanctions thus represents an essential aspect of compulsory suffrage, in which the rationale of the provision is understood, that is, the defense of electoral participation as an instrument of self-determination and control of the people over rulers.

A second fundamental empirical aspect to be considered regards the relation between compulsory voting and political knowledge (and engagement) of the citizens. The impact of compulsory voting on people's epistemic agency is controversial, as Singh's recent and exhaustive study has shown. «[L]iterature on compulsory voting's effects on political engagement and political knowledge is both rich and contentious. Empirical research on the topic is similarly expansive and incongruous» (Singh 2021: 46). Some studies demonstrate the clear influence of mandatory turnout on citizens' attitude to seek out information before voting and observe a positive link between political sophistication and the duty to vote.<sup>88</sup> Contrastingly, other investigations contest compulsory voting's capacity to increase political knowledge and, moreover, these analyses are unable to conclude that compulsory voting induces long-term engagement with politics.<sup>89</sup>

Given these empirical premises, can compulsory voting be considered the institutional mean to provide the demos an epistemic empowerment and make democracy an enlightened procedure? We suggest a positive answer, asserting that compulsory voting might be seen as a kind of institutions' affirmative action to protect and value the pillars of enlightened proceduralism, that is, equality, freedom, and political knowledge of the demos.

First, compulsory voting reflects a democratic procedure more focused on equality among citizens as inspiring value of political decision-making. Indeed, there is a strong correlation between abstention and social inequality. Poor, black, young, and uneducated fail to vote more than other categories and, importantly, those same groups are the most vulnerable to political ignorance. On this basis, abstention is the characteristic outcome of the lowest social classes. This conclusion is largely supported in political science, even by critics of compulsory voting (Saunders 2010). A landmark study on this issue is Lijphart's text on "unequal participation", where he incisively demonstrates that «socioeconomic status and voting were positively, not negatively,

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<sup>88</sup> See for instance Berggren (2001), Großer and Seebauer (2016), Bruce and Costa Lima (2019).

<sup>89</sup> See for instance de Leon and Rizzi (2014; 2016), Holbein and Rangel (2020).

linked» (Lijphart 1997: 1) and, consequently, that «low voter turnout means unequal and socioeconomically biased turnout» (Lijphart 1997: 2). In this regard, compulsory voting represents the institutional remedy to include everyone in decision process and encourage all people to see mandatory turnout as the opportunity to express their say on choices that will affect their future. According to Lijphart, this would mean evolving universal suffrage into universal participation (Lijphart 1997: 11). Compulsory voting as advancement of universal and voluntary suffrage can realize this evocative goal. By itself, universal suffrage prevents elites from having greater political power by assigning every citizen an equal quote of political power – one person one vote. Compulsory voting would force all people to have their say, providing a stimulus for their ideas to be counted through ballot papers. On one side, universal suffrage limited the electoral power by elite. On the other, compulsory voting encourages participation of disadvantaged social groups. In this regard, both the measures embody institutional devices to affirm equality as pillar of democracy.

Second, compulsory voting establishes freedom as foundational value of democracy. Some authors have contradicted this reading, defending the existence of a right not to vote (Rydon 1989, Lever 2008, Saunders 2012 and 2018). However, scholars unanimously recognize that compulsory voting is a misnomer (Hill 2002, Keaney and Rodgers 2006, Engelen 2007, Birch 2009, Saunders 2018). More properly, mandatory is turnout, that is, eligible citizens are asked to attend a polling place on election day and have their names marked of the roll. People are required to participate in elections without the burden to choose among candidates, as they can spoil the ballot, cast a blank ballot, register without casting any ballot, exercise conscientious objection without being punished. Despite this crucial clarification, we shall continue to use the term “compulsory voting” as the literature analyzes this institutional device with these words. In this view, the duty imposed on citizens is not to vote but to participate in elections. Therefore, the right not to take a position in the political dispute is guaranteed and freedom of thought is not questioned. Indeed, compulsory voting realizes the duty to dedicate a modest portion of time to attend polling stations on election day.

Strictly speaking, no one is compelled to vote. No one is obliged to fill in a ballot paper or to choose one of the parties or candidates in contention. The only duty that a citizen has to fulfil is to come to the polling station on a precise date. (Lacroix 2007: 193)

Compulsory voting has a little cost in terms of negative freedom, which is in any case even lower than other obligations imposed by the state (Brennan and Hill 2014: 113). Moreover, the interference implied by compulsory voting is easily justified by resorting to the other side of freedom, the positive one. In this view, the State enhance citizens' liberty not only by guaranteeing protection from external impediments, but also by providing the tools – as seen for right to education – to exercise freedom as autonomy, participation, and self-determination. Benjamin Constant famously depicted this “positive” shade of liberty.

[P]olitical liberty is the most powerful, the most effective means of self-development that heaven has given us' because it 'enlarges [the citizens'] spirit, ennobles their thoughts, and establishes among them a kind of intellectual equality which forms the glory and power of a people (Constant, 1997, p. 617).<sup>90</sup>

Constant's appealing mention of citizens spirit, thoughts, and intellect allows us to consider the third contribution of compulsory voting, namely, its role in citizens' epistemic empowerment. As clarified, compulsory voting's capacity to spread political knowledge is debatable from an empirical perspective. One might say that compulsory voting per se does not promise political knowledge of the demos as *output*. However, we shall see, crucial here is to recognize which measure can provide epistemic empowerment as *input* within democratic process (see chapter 4, section 4). Compulsory voting represents a stimulus to overcome political insouciance and orient citizens towards political knowledge. In other words, compulsory voting refines the democratic procedure and makes it more like an enlightened process, as citizens are

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<sup>90</sup> Quoted by Lacroix (2007: 191).

encouraged to be aware of their role in the procedure itself and, above all, have the opportunity to acquire this awareness thanks to the commitment of the institutions. Admittedly, compulsory voting may not work and the increase in political knowledge of citizenship may result modest or irrelevant. Nevertheless, compulsory voting would maintain a strong procedural value, as it would institutionalize the relationship between citizens and political participation. The citizen would be systematically led to consider the elections and, hopefully, the complexity behind them.

Democratic process would be refined by compulsory voting as attack advertising aimed at depressing turnout among those not likely to vote (poor, black, young, uneducated) would lose their appeal (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995). Moreover, as Birch argues, the obligation to participate can oppose the «atomised existences» of contemporary societies and can «break the cycle of disaffection, disengagement and under-representation» (Birch 2009: 23). These two effects would respectively impact on hooligans and hobbits and their insouciance in dealing with public politics.

### *The “Visible Hand”*

Compulsory voting favors the development of citizens’ epistemic agency by triggering a virtuous circle through the enhancement of free and equal political participation. Along with it, there is a second institutional strategy consistent with the normative view of democracy as an enlightened procedure. Borrowing Rosanvallon’s effective formulation, this is the institutionalization of a “visible hand”. The French author recalls Adam Smith’s famous metaphor according to which a providential “invisible hand” allows the free market to produce social benefits and public good through individuals acting in their own self-interests. In contrast to this perspective, Rosanvallon underlines how economic theory has understood the need to introduce surveillance mechanisms (the *visible hand*) to ensure that information flows freely and make sure that no agent enjoys a situational rent derived from a monopoly of information. Such a device therefore has a purely epistemic function and overcomes

the self-referentiality of the economic system (particularly the financial system and the credit market) and the imperfection of mutual control exercised by financial actors.

Passing from free market to democratic politics, Rosanvallon sees the same need to introduce a supervisory institution into the decision-making process, so that the visible hand of third-party institutions can regulate the information flow and cure the “dyscrasia” typical of mutual control mechanism between rival forces. «The insufficiency of horizontal regulation in the markets is comparable to the insufficiency of the electoral bond: in both cases there is a lack of vertical control capable of ensuring that regulation operates in a “time-consistent” manner». (Rosanvallon 2008: 276-8)

Put in these terms, Rosanvallon’s parallel is suggestive but presents problems deriving from the obvious impossibility of overlapping financial business on democracy. In fact, finance recognizes the risk of loss and the possibility of earning as the main criteria to make assessments. Contrastingly, in politics disagreement and pluralism reign over what are the criteria for positively or negatively assessing a choice. Therefore, to imagine a surveillance system designed to «ensure that government serves the general interest» (Rosanvallon 2008: 277) entails the obvious problems as the surveillance system itself cannot know what the general interest it tries to ensure consists of. Considering these difficulties, it is not surprising that Rosanvallon develops his institutional intuitions concerning the visible hand by concentrating on epistemic side of the proposal and considering financial rating in contemporary finance. Indeed, these oversight institutions perform an informational function and have no coercive powers.

<sup>91</sup> Rather, financial rating agencies act as “third-party evaluators”, offering assessments of commercial credit, stocks, and bonds and thus intervening with their visible hand in the functioning of the market. Rating agencies were born as the «response to a widespread feeling at the time that the market had failed for lack of sufficient independent information» (Rosanvallon 2008: 278). Again, the institutionalization of

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<sup>91</sup> In introducing his argument about oversight institutions, Rosanvallon referred to authorities with coercive powers (e.g., Securities and Exchange Commission in the United States and of the *Autorité des Marchés Financiers* in France).



rating within political process represents a possible way to spread vertical, neutral, reliable information that every citizen could acquire.

In summary, the visible hand of the institutions in charge of monitoring the political debate would be “third-party”, informative, supervisory (Rosanvallon 2008: 278-9). The members of these institutions could be chosen by the scientific and academic communities, passed after the scrutiny of political representatives and appointed by a qualified majority. The epistemic standing of the selected experts would be guaranteed by their achievements and reputation (credentials, track records, disclosure of affiliations) and, very importantly, by the relationship with the scientific community they come from.<sup>92</sup> In this way, the selected members would guarantee a certain impartiality. It is important to note that this institution would not have coercive powers and, therefore, it would be much easier to avoid a partisan and contentious confirmation process as happens for example in the United States with the appointments of Supreme Court judges. In fact, second point, the visible hand – as we shall see – is geared to disseminating simple and clear information on politics, that is, to spreading serviceable truths on the rules of the game, the crucial issues of the debate and the positions of parties/politicians. In this sense, third aspect, the visible hand would perform a supervisory function by keeping track of what the political actors have done and thus facilitating their evaluation by the people.

Visible hand embodies a radically different approach to the epistemic empowerment than the enhancement provided by rights and compulsory voting. Instead of simply smoothing the way for citizens’ autonomous epistemic empowerment, the visible hand of institutions directly enhances citizens’ epistemic agency by spreading reliable, simplified, accessible political knowledge. A further line of development of the

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<sup>92</sup> Schudson argues that experts’ bond with their scientific community is the foundation of their reputation. Experts’ “truth-seeking” is part of their professional ethics and consists of a willingness to submit their work to the external scrutiny and evaluation procedures (Schudson 2006). In this sense, the standing of the experts does not derive only from their knowledge but from the fact that their skills emerge through a severe and continuous process of judgment.

institutions imagined by Rosanvallon is proposed by Jeffrey's reflection on expertise and political inclusion. The author investigates the potential role of "specialized agencies" in the democratic process, trying to balance the undoubted epistemic reliability of luminaries' deliberation with the autonomy and the inclusion of democratic citizenship. Institutions at stakes would house experience and expertise which is *«not common: it's neither acquirable nor surveyable by non-experts»* (Jeffrey 2017: 3). The visible hand of these institutions would intervene in the decision-making process by guaranteeing public opinion faithful but reliable syntheses of the stakes and the implications behind possible options. In Jeffrey's views, experts' visible hand can provide an epistemic empowerment to the people by formulating political considerations in a different way from what happens with the scale of financial ratings. Although the visible hand must intervene clearly and accessibly, it can hardly empower the demos by just ranking political proposals as AAA or BBB+. <sup>93</sup> To this end, experts' judgements should not be presented as words *ex cathedra*, which are in themselves infallible. As Moore proposed, conclusions of institutions lead by experts should be understood with Turner's notion of "fact surrogate" (Turner 2003: 91), that is, the most trustworthy epistemic reconstructions that we can dispose of by virtue of the process by which they are given, even if these achievements remain fallible and improvable in the future. In this light, information provided by experts' visible hand are worth of acceptance even they are not believed. As Moore argues *«we might agree to treat something as a fact for the purposes of a policy deliberation»* (Moore 2017: 72), and thus *«to make that claim a premiss in our reasoning and action, not necessarily believing it»* (Moore 2017: 75). This kind of relation, Moore ensures, not only respect people's epistemic autonomy but also represents a promising approach to increase experts' credibility. <sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> These are examples of financial rating evaluations.

<sup>94</sup> *«Such acceptance is consistent with not believing the substantive claim; indeed, doubting a proposition while agreeing to go along with it in one's reasoning in a particular context provides a*

It is at this point that the problem of inclusion investigated by Jeffrey arises. Democracy, in fact, values the freedom and equality of citizens by including them in political decision-making. As Trout rightly noted, «[i]nformation and knowledge is a crucial feature of responsible self-governance, and it is in this way that epistemic and political inclusion make theoretical contact» (Trout 2013: 1298-9). To realize this epistemic inclusion, together with spreading serviceable truth, experts' visible hands might outline multiple routes for compliance so that citizens might easily orient in political debate by relying on experts' recommendations without drowning their foreground values. In fact, experts are expected to enlighten the demos about the "factual side" of decision-making (background elements) without demanding to have the last word on values and priorities (foreground elements). With Jeffrey's words, experts «don't have the standing to tell the climate change denier she ought to prioritize mitigating climate damage over combating other problems, like poverty and hunger» (Jeffrey 2017: 14). As Manin observed in characterizing the rights of electors, they «must be free to determine which qualities they value positively and to choose from among those qualities the one they regard as the proper criterion for political selection» (Manin 1997: 158). To connect facts and values, experts' suggestions might take a conditional form to save individual autonomy and make sure that people maintain control on choices to be made. Jeffrey formulates experts recommends in this way: «ought (if p, then phi) or ought (if q, then psi)» where p and q represent evaluative beliefs outside the specialized institution's area of expertise and phi and psi are courses of action» (Jeffrey 2017: 17). In this view, the visible hand embodies a support in dealing with the complexity of political choices, making this complexity manifest, fixing some key points that allow citizens to decide with greater mindfulness but preserving people's autonomy to formulate an overall and final decision. Even more

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plausible motivation to closely scrutinize the process by which the claim was produced. Such scrutiny, in turn, can lead to the sort of retrospective testing that can demonstrate reliability and trustworthiness and thus warrant deference to experts in particular instances» (Moore 2017: 72).

important, conditional form of experts' suggestions (if q, then psi; or, if you have preference X, consider party/candidate Y), would remark that the empowerment of the visible hand focuses on the background elements of the political process refraining from indoctrinating the voter on what are the *right values* to defend (i.e., the foreground elements to embrace).

Of course, the visible hand of the experts does not replace citizens' "truth seeking" and reflection on moral preferences to advocate as political decision-makers. Rather, visible hand aims to stimulate citizens' deliberation by providing them with a minimal epistemic empowerment, a kind of political "literacy teaching", leaving the burden of developing it to individual willingness. Furthermore, experts' visible hand is required – as Christiano argues – to act as an «external filter» (Christiano 2012: 42), which means, to denounce false information, emphasizes that candidates have change their mind, denounce inconsistency between electoral commitment and actual decisions.

From a theoretical point of view, the visible hand strategy is inspired by the oversight institutions which operates in finance and attempts to provide epistemic empowerment to citizens by disseminating information on politics and formulating suggestions which are conditional in form. Alongside dissemination, the visible hand acts as a "filter", highlighting contradictions and misrepresentations regarding rules of the game, cruxes of the debate, political actors. A starting point for the effective development of the visible hand is represented by two existing agencies. The first one is the *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung* (bpb), the German Federal Agency for Civic Education. The agency was established in 1952 as Federal Agency for Homeland Services to educate the German people about democratic principles and prevent any moves to re-establish a totalitarian regime. In the following decades the agency evolved and today supports citizens' role of political decision-makers in several ways: training action in schools, universities, on the web; publications, films, promotional materials; seminars and events. The visible hand of the experts working in *Bundeszentrale* aims to disseminate information on the political context, to promote deliberation among citizens and to encourage an epistemic responsibility on the part of citizens in taking a position on

public problems. Interestingly, the “bpb” has also developed a voting advice application (VVA), the so-called *Wahl-O-Mat*. Using a series of questions, this tool matches expressed preferences with one of the competing parties/candidates. As hoped by Jeffrey, through VVA the visible hand would facilitate individuals’ choice without questioning their points of view. Critics have rightly noted that VVA structures political information in a way that is informed by the developers’ presuppositions and, in this view, offers a contestable picture of politics (Fossen, Van den Brink 2015). However, the use of VVA might be coupled with specific alert about the limits of the matching mechanism and the link to more comprehensive discussions of political topics. Undeniably, VVA alone cannot substitute individual commitment to figure out political problems and relative moral issues. Nonetheless, such a tool can perform a formative function if it is part of a comprehensive effort of the State to support citizens’ understanding of politics.

A second actor is the host of fact-checking organizations: examples include FactCheck.org and PolitiFact in the USA, and Full Fact in the UK. These organizations focus on political debate and act exactly as the filter described by Christiano. «PolitiFact.org uses a six-point scale for determining whether a political statement is factually correct or not, allowing a much more nuanced picture of a political fact» (Rapeli 2014: 88). Interestingly, Rapeli concludes that those agencies «measure the degree of correctness instead of a simple right–wrong dichotomy» (Rapeli 2014: 88). In addition to filtering false information and dissuading candidates from disseminating questionable stating (Nyhan and Reifler 2015), these organizations make it possible to raise public awareness on the complexity of politics and the recognition of a purely cognitive side of political decision-making. The nature of knowledge is a process, open to change but made up of achievements and facts on which it is worth relying. At least in knowledge it makes sense to maintain verticality, recognizing the presence in society of people capable of justifying, divulging, explaining what can be adopted as a “serviceable truth”.

## 4. Addressing Criticisms

### *Elitism, Output vs. Input, Primacy of Episteme*

This concluding section considers potential objections to the institutionalization of epistemic empowerment. In particular, the first part shall take into account three objections to the project of shaping the democratic process so as to enhance the epistemic agency of citizens, while the second part addresses three criticisms to the proposals discussed in the third section of the chapter (compulsory voting and visible hand). The ambition to institutionalize the epistemic empowerment of citizens appears vulnerable to three basic objections: elitism, unrealistic characterization of the outputs, disproportionate importance to episteme as core issue of democratic society (“epistemecentrism”).

First, one can argue that such an argument, although intriguing to the eyes of those hoping for a stronger democracy, goes far beyond the idea of democracy and defends an overly ambitious model of *elitist* democracy. Simply put, institutionalization of epistemic empowerment seems to be justified by the desire to see a brilliant deliberation and competition among skillful citizens. Nevertheless, democracy can occur even though citizens are unprepared, thus, vulnerable to trivial errors or rough misunderstandings. In few words, advocates of epistemic empowerment risk to confuse “democracy” with “militant democracy”. Therefore, the institutional phase aimed at empowering the demos would ground on stipulative definition of democracy, which only admits democracy of “enlightened” people as real democracy and labels as non-democracy all other forms of democracy, which paradoxically are those existing.

As seen, “epistemic empowerment” is aimed at providing demos the elements to orient in political decision-making and has nothing to do with elitism. Consider the notion of “serviceable truth” outlined in third chapter as core of epistemic empowerment. Very simply, political citizens are empowered by a body of modest truths about rules of democratic games, cruxes of public debate, political actors (candidates and parties).

Interpreted in this way, epistemic empowerment describes the provision of background elements which introduce citizens in the decision curve about public issues. Empowerment, we shall return on this, is thus the attempt of simplifying and facilitating the access of basic truths about politics to nourish one's deliberation. These "truths" – serviceable truths – do not raise Brennan's Vulcans, but constitutes a first encouragement to act at least as Muggles, namely, as moderately informed but epistemically engaged citizens. In the same way, empowerment of the players through the explanation of the rule does not guarantee in any way that game will achieve high levels. So, with Brennan's terms, competition is not interpreted by Vulcan-players nor realizes high level contests. On the contrary, that preliminary phase spread modest but direct information about the way to interact in the game, offers a general picture of the rules of the game, cruxes of public debate, political actors. Similarly, institutionalization of epistemic empowerment defended by enlightened proceduralism presents the centrality of citizens and the epistemic burden they must bear as decision-makers as worthy of institutional recognition. To realize an elitist democracy, one should advocate exclusion of ignorant citizens or plural voting to favor the most informed individuals. The epistocracy had exactly this purpose, assuming an instrumental understanding of democracy and a technical interpretation of political knowledge (chapter 3, section 1 and 2). Right the contrary, enlightened proceduralism goes in the opposite direction than epistocracy as it combines inclusion with the spread of episteme through appropriate institutional devices.

A second criticism stems from the reach of epistemic empowerment. Institutionalization of enlightened proceduralism seems to be linked to an unattainable realization of mass "enlightenment" and, therefore, sounds like an unrealistic project. Particularly, comparing the epistemic empowerment of democratic citizenship to the formation of players through the explanation of the rules of the game minimizes the enormous difference both in scale and complexity between social deduction games and mass democracy and, with it, the consequent intricacy of making the whole demos knowledgeable about politics. Problematic here is the underestimation of

empowerment as *output*. Spreading information about democracy so that citizens are effectively empowered to act as decision-makers embodies a challenging endeavor whose reach is not realistically depicted by preliminary explanation of the rules which happens in games.

Epistemic empowerment advocated by enlightened proceduralism insists on the need for democratic institutions to spread political knowledge in the system without demanding that such information take root in demos' conscience. To put another way, epistemic empowerment portrays the duty for democratic arrangement to hamper epistemic insouciance through the clear, transparent, reliable *input* to rely on political serviceable truths. Simply put, enlightened proceduralism demands a consistency between democratic faith in people centrality and the design of democracy as institutional arrangement. From this perspective, what is central is the care of demos' connection with political decision-making through the inputs provided and not the outputs observed. Very simply, politically ignorant denizens can exist even in an empowered democracy – that is the *output* level. However, what is crucial is the systematic struggle of democratic arrangement to include every citizen by supplying episteme, appealing to one's capacity to understand reality, soliciting everyone to deal with public concerns – that is the *input* level. Enlightened involvement of the demos is the core value of democracy and must be pursued by the way democracy is designed. In medical ethics, a similar point can be made about the problem of informed consent. A surprising percentage of patients or participants in medical trials, even if educated, missed pivotal aspects of the treatment they undergo (Flory, Wendler, and Emanuel 2008; Mandava, Pace, Campbell, Emanuel, Grady 2012). Informed consent as autonomous authorization at the light of substantial understanding «is still the principal challenge that we confront» (Beauchamp 2011: 519). Again, informed consent as output is often not achieved, despite it is systematically researched through informed consent as input. Millus and Bromwich points out that persistence of ignorance does not represent a problem for informed consent as consent strives for accessible disclosure of information but, very important, patients' understanding could not cover



all the aspects touched by disclosure. Informed consent does not imply that all what is disclosed must also be understood.

The primary purpose of disclosure is not the achievement of understanding, but the avoidance of a kind of illegitimate control. In order to avoid this control, the person requesting consent must disclose all the information she knows that she both has reason to think is relevant to the consent decision and that the profferer of consent would reasonably expect to receive. The understanding requirement is grounded in the conditions for the successful performance of the speech act of giving consent. To meet it, the person proffering consent must understand three things: (1) that she is giving consent; (2) how to exercise her right to give or refuse consent; and (3) to what she is being asked to consent. Our analysis explains why it is sometimes permissible to enroll willing participants who have not understood everything that they ought to be told about their clinical trials. (Millum and Bromwich 2021: 47)

Put differently, informed consent embodies a transparent disclosure of information, on which patient must consent knowing the meaning and the implications of their consent as speech act. Provision of key information must occur so that even uneducated and non-expert participants can grasp in general terms the issues on which they give consent. In this sense, Millum and Bromwich applaud the revision of informed consent guidelines inspired by the need for a concise and focused presentation of key information which considers people's «well-documented deliberative frailties» (Millum and Bromwich 2021: 57). In case of democracy and epistemic empowerment defended here, a similar concern came into play in the analysis of visible hand and its function to act as “filter” in ensuring transparency and information. As Rosenfeld puts it, the values at stake here are “transparency” and “factuality” (Rosenfeld 2018: 2). Democracy as enlightened proceduralism urges the commitment of institutions to address the problem of demos' political knowledge without questioning demos' liberty to ignore politics or individuals' possibility to make mistakes in political deliberation. For this reason, epistemic empowerment should be assessed as input within democratic process, not as output.

Finally, the third criticism concentrates on the attention given to the theme of the episteme. The demand to empower the demos against political ignorance might sound as marginal if compared with other distortions of today society as, for instance, social injustices and inequalities. Why put episteme before the other needs of democratic society? Social problems, for instance, determine political ignorance and alienation of several citizens from political discussion. Institutionalization of the epistemic empowerment represents in this sense an undue priority of episteme over social issues: why not institutionalize, for instance, the flattening of social inequalities as preliminary condition of democratic societies? From this perspective, focusing on epistemic can be read as the arrogant proposal coming from detached thinkers, who look at reality from their ivory tower.

On this critic we must, to some extent, bite the bullet. In fact, enlightened proceduralism starts from the characterization of the episteme as co-essential component, together with morality, of the democratic decision-making process. As seen, decision-making can be broken up into background conditions and foreground conditions (see chapter 3, section 4). *Deciding* always involves both *understanding* (episteme) and *taking a stand* (affirming one's morality, values, experience). From this point of view, episteme remains a constitutive dimension of democracy as decision-making practice and needs to be recognized as such by the form that democratic institutions take. Starting from the assumption that democracy is first and foremost a form of collective decision-making on the problems of society, enlightened proceduralism concedes that social emergencies are certainly one of the *causes* of political ignorance but, before that, insists that those troubles are *consequences* of political decision-making. Accordingly, it is not the episteme that holds a primacy over, for instance, social problems. Rather, the primacy that enlightened proceduralism places at the premise of its conclusions is the priority of collective decisions, that is, of politics, as a tool for addressing the needs of society. Enlightened proceduralism and its defense of epistemic empowerment can therefore only be accused of characterizing the political process as the preeminent way to manage social change and, to bite the

bullet on the centrality of politics for the life of the people. A further element, which has been stressed several times, is the centrality of citizens. Enlightened proceduralism insists on epistemic empowerment to allow the demos to carry out the role democracy entrusts to demos itself. The reference to the episteme does not deny this premise but starts from this premise to develop a reflection on democracy. Attention to the episteme is therefore an attention to the centrality of people, which defines democracy and determines its destiny more than other – important – social and economic aspects.

### *Compulsory Voting and Visible Hands: Addressing Criticisms*

This section attempts to anticipate and respond to some objections to the combination of compulsory voting and visible hand as institutional realization of enlightened proceduralism. Linking mandatory participation to the role of epistemic agencies can be interpreted as an attempt to bring popular participation back to the point of view of experts. In this light, such a strategy lays itself open to distrust of experts' preeminence. Experts – more than referees – would appear as full-fledged players, with their own experiences, values, and preferences. As Guerrero effectively explained, several experts take their professional path because of certain values and experiences or, on the contrary, exercising a certain profession by virtue of one's expertise leads to embracing certain values<sup>95</sup>. More generally, being an expert entails precise features in education, income, milieu. Bovens and Wille, for instance, characterize higher

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<sup>95</sup> «Interests cause expertise: having distinctive interests  $V^*$  causes one to seek out more evidence and information about topic  $Q^*$ . Sarah Brady: whose life was changed dramatically as a result of gun violence, leading her to care about the issue, learn about it, and become a zealous advocate» (Guerrero 2021: 437). Alternatively, expertise can lead to specific positions. «Expertise causes interests: developing the epistemic excellence with respect to  $Q^*$  leads one to have distinctive interests  $V^*$ . [...] Colonel Marshall: whose military training, experience as an engineer, and education have led him to have certain views about how to promote peace and conduct war when doing so is necessary» (Guerrero 2021: 437).

education (common trait of experts) as a social “cleavage”. Even in the choice of the partner, experts have precise preferences: they systematically tend to choose other experts (“educational homogamy”) (Bovens and Wille 2017: 42-56). Moreover, Bovens and Wille note that high education tends to be coupled with specific political preferences. «Well-educated and less well-educated individuals exhibit significant differences in attitudes and preferences regarding cultural issues such as immigration, ethnic diversity, and European unification» (Bovens and Wille 2017: 19). The visible hand of the experts would thus end up being perceived as the expression of “closed epistemic community” and the arrogant imposition of the “beltway insiders” (Rosenfeld 2018: 84-5), who advocate their foreground elements while explaining the background elements. These experts’ traits represent the fertile ground for many forms of anti-intellectualism and feed the suspects that experts are becoming the unarmed troops of a specific political faction.<sup>96</sup> As a result, relying on experts’ commitment via specific institutions to cure citizens’ political ignorance risks to increase those suspects. The empowerment of people fostered by compulsory voting and the visible hand of experts would appear to be an epistemic coup on the part of the elites and would lead to an even more radical mobilization of those who believe much more in “common sense” than in academies.<sup>97</sup> To recall the famous words by Bernard Shaw, what we would observe is “conspiracies against the laity”.

Criticisms against proposed institutional approach takes on various shades: anti-intellectualism, anti-elitism, the impermeability of knowledge circles to people’s first-hand knowledge, fear of a political process other-directed by “movers and shakers”. Although it is difficult to provide an exhaustive and satisfactory answer to all these criticisms, the defense of compulsory voting and visible hand as institutional devices

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<sup>96</sup> Rosenfeld describes such a tendency in the USA. «Trust in institutions dedicated to knowledge production and dissemination (as opposed, to say, policing) has become characteristic of the American center and left alone» (Rosenfeld 2018: 121).

<sup>97</sup> Ronald Reagan, for instance, remarked in his Farewell Address that his compass in important issues such as economic recovery and peace with the Soviet Union was nothing more than common sense.

to provide the demos an epistemic empowerment must necessarily leverage three arguments: neutrality through dissemination, porousness to people's inputs, risk of excessive politicization of society. <sup>98</sup>

Institutions charged with disseminating political knowledge in society – in particular the visible hand – should remain neutral with respect to the forces engaged in the political arena and could do so, first and foremost, by fulfilling the task of supporting decision-making through dissemination of trustworthy information. The visible hand of the experts, in fact, is not expected to engage with solving public problems by virtue of its competence but, rather, to make its competence available to certify reliable, modest, and accessible information on the policy itself. In a nutshell, expert's visible hand is not expected to solve difficult problems but to guarantee easy information that can encourage people to reflect on difficult problems. Indeed, epistemic empowerment at stake implies the commitment of the State to *care* citizens against political illiteracy with serviceable truths which are, by definition, modest. <sup>99</sup> The action of the visible hand thus fully respects the autonomy of citizens, challenging their epistemic insouciance with accessible information on difficult problems and tackling their dogmatism by recounting people the complexity of contemporary politics. The people would in no way be subjugated as they keep total control of their political views. As seen, agencies in the hands of experts would have no coercive power to censure

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<sup>98</sup> The criticisms illustrated are centered almost exclusively on the appeal to experts to spread the episteme. In this regard, they target the visible hand. However, they also indirectly involve compulsory voting which would entail an “amplification” of visible hand's effects. Indeed, from the perspective of the critics, people would first be indoctrinated and then forced to vote. In this sense, the combination of the two institutional tools is criticized. In the following pages we shall try to reject the criticisms of the visible hand, thus showing that no propagandistic “amplification” occurs.

<sup>99</sup> The need to understand “care” by institutions as the fulcrum for an ambitious (if not revolutionary) normative agenda has been upheld by Tronto (2013, 2015). In this regard, Tronto rightly urged that institutions are the key to trigger such a process. «Institutions shape who we are and how we think of ourselves as citizens» (Tronto 2015: 17). The role of democratic institutions advocated by Tronto is particularly inspiring also for epistemic empowerment under consideration.

individuals' political belief. More simply, experts' agencies would benefit public resources and visibility in the public debate for the sole purpose of disseminating information about democratic politics. The combination of experts' visible hand and compulsory voting embodies the attempt to conjugate verticality in knowledge with horizontality in political participation. That combination represents a possible way to design an enlightened citizens-driven democracy, realizing the wish that "experts should be on tap, but not on top".

A second point concerns the permeability of experts to the views of ordinary people. A brilliant example of this conduct is given by Moore, who describes the strategy of Dutch Environment Agency in facing political controversies after an error in the 2007 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Fourth Assessment Report concerning how much of the Netherlands lay below sea level. Coming after earlier reports of a mistake about the melting of Himalayan glaciers this further error created great public controversy. Moore argues that this case exemplifies the effectiveness of «direct engagement with critical publics by an expert institution in a context of heated politicisation» (174). In fact, this kind of engagement illustrates the way «expert institutions can be porous and responsive to public criticism» (Moore 2017: 174).

This repertoire included using blogging as a way of creating a continuous engagement between an agency scientist and a climate sceptic, which aimed to get around the problem that sceptics would evade criticism by repeating claims in different contexts for different audiences. It also included setting up a public website in which members of the public were invited to identify possible errors in the report using a typology that included not only simple inaccurate statements that could be corrected with an erratum, but also 'inaccurate referencing', 'insufficiently substantiated attribution', 'insufficiently transparent expert judgment', 'untraceable reference' [...]. In this way, they invited critical public engagement but framed it in a more careful and productive way than the common media treatment of the discovery of errors. The effect of these and other performances was to communicate that the agency itself was reflective and self-critical, adopting a posture of humility as well as substantive engagement with critics. (Moore 2017: 175).

Specialists are often perceived as distant by the concerns and worries of the proverbial “man in the street”, who has less time and energy to investigate political issues. This distance can be perceived even as arrogance or alienation from real world. As an answer to this, Moore’s point emphasizes the benefits in terms of reputation stemming from experts’ porousness and humility in facing people’s criticisms, doubts, and corrections. All in all, experts cannot disregard their reputation as critical factor. Accordingly, it is up to them to develop a “service ethic” which internalizes patience and receptiveness to the solicitations of non-experts. Even more, porousness to the public constitutes a clear incentive for experts to refine their work. Noveck, for instance, underlines that openness of institutions to the inputs of the people brings many benefits: more and better insights, greater scrutiny, more diverse approaches, new actors (Noveck 2015: 9-13). In fact, Noveck asserts, «people might possess skills and know-how relevant to governing that could be used to solve problems, create public goods or deliver service» (Noveck 2015: 83). To facilitate the involvement and the trust of the demos, porousness of experts must be coupled with transparency. Experts’ assessments and studies need to remain available and traceable, so that the possibility of mistakes or further refinement is not a priori denied. As Richardson puts it: «a process of collective reasoning that significantly relies on experts may need to require the experts to keep appropriate records of their data sets, proofs, or other grounds on which they base their conclusions» (Richardson 2012: 104).

A final virtue of the proposed institutional strategy is the recalcitrance to implement an overdemanding politicization of citizens’ lives. This problem is well captured by the quote from Wilde reported by Walzer in his critical description of socialism.<sup>100</sup> Walzer sees in the socialist ideal a problem of a pragmatic and anthropological nature, namely the excessive commitment required of citizens. «Socialism, Oscar Wilde once wrote, would take too many evenings» (Walzer 1968). There are more courageous, ambitious and, probably, more effective strategies than compulsory voting and visible hand to

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<sup>100</sup> Pintore recalls the same Wilde’s quote in her criticism of deep democrats (Pintore 2003: 72).

enhance the decision-making capacity of citizens. However, more radical solutions have substantial costs which Wilde captures with his usual sagacity. The creation of a highly prepared demos from an epistemic point of view would require a radical rethinking of its role in favor of strong democratic solutions, which however would question its representative and liberal structure.<sup>101</sup> This investigation did not open this Pandora's box, pointing out that political participation is not a universal preference and that, for this reason, it makes sense to rely on the knowledge of experts to ensure that public deliberation is moderately enlightened, without becoming overly demanding. Contemporary society is in fact accustomed to a division of labor and, consequently, it could be unrealistic – at least in the short term – to hypothesize a radical reorganization of contemporary economics so that common people can have the time to deal with politics. Moreover, even in a world like that, people might not be enthusiastic about politics and prefer doing something else. Compulsory voting and visible hand facilitate people's empowerment as decision-makers and protect them from the risks of a politicized society, which is shaped by the confrontation and rivalries typical of politics. This risk is well described by Warren.

Trust would be unlikely, and respect for differences would be fragile. So, the problem with a politicized society is not that it is totalitarian [...] but that it may contain too many contests and too few securities to function. [...] [P]olitics is exceptional and difficult: a political stance toward another often indicates a failure of other kinds of social understandings. (Warren 1996: 251)

The commitment of the experts would ensure mediation and support for people's decisions. Instead of imagining citizenship in the service of politics, as Wilde's socialists do, it would be the institutions of democracy that serve citizenship. Contempt towards experts, conceived as arrogant, may remain the great problem of democracy as enlightened procedure. Their visible hand could be perceived as an insufferable

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<sup>101</sup> One of the most striking examples is Barber's text, *Strong Democracy* (1984).



know-it-all. However, democracy has both ambitions and costs. The empowerment of citizens is about making the demos the central political decision-maker. This ambition certainly implies risks and costs, but some risks are too interesting to resist and some costs too accessible not to be paid.

## **Conclusion**

The chapter tried to account for the need to shape the democratic process so that it would be more consistent with the two premises that characterize democracy itself: the centrality of the people and the epistemic dimension of decision-making. The democratic framework is founded on the ideal of being “citizen-driven” and, as such, philosophy as a form of government also embodies a philosophy of citizenship. With this in mind, democratic institutions are required to empowering the epistemic agency of citizens, facilitating knowledge of the background elements of the political process and supporting the deliberation of citizens-decision makers.

The chapter focused on the role of freedom rights to show how liberal democracy has *already* internalized the need to guarantee citizens an epistemic empowerment, by ensuring them the possibility to know and discover, without fear of condemnation, coercion, and abuse. Alongside them, social rights – such as the right to education – guarantee individuals the resources to be able to understand reality and, with it, the problems of politics.

Finally, the chapter concentrated on how democracy *can change* its procedures to be better able to stem political ignorance and allow citizens to understand the stakes on which they decide. Compulsory voting would make engagement with the political process a structural aspect of democratic practice, acting as a stimulus to understand and deliberate before participating. Alongside it, the analysis highlighted the crucial function that the “visible hand” of the experts could play. This second institutional proposal, associated with the incentive to participate provided by compulsory voting, would make the role of the episteme as serviceable truth even more evident. Indeed,

experts' support would embody the institutionalization of enlightened proceduralism, understood as the ability of democratic citizens to understand reality – directly and through experts – and decide accordingly without jeopardizing liberty, equality and existence of persistent disagreement.

## Final Remarks

«We think that, even though there may be dangers, the Spartans will be more inclined to undertake them on our behalf, and to consider them a better investment than they would in other cases, given that for practical purposes we lie close to the Peloponnese and our kinship offers them a surer guarantee of loyalty».

Thucydides

At the end of the dialogue with the Athenians, the Melians decided not to submit to their dominion and to defend the freedom of their island by fighting. The decision of the Melians affirmed noble values: freedom, dignity, faith in the gods who defend the virtuous. In their deliberation, however, there are not only values (foreground elements) but also facts, that is, epistemic considerations (background elements). The Melians thought that Sparta would have helped them as it was worthwhile for Sparta to preserve the reputation of being a faithful ally. Furthermore, strategic reasons would have prompted Sparta to curb the expansion of Athens. Finally, the Melians knew they could withstand the siege of the Athenians. In fact, in the following months, they managed to conquer part of the Athenian wall. Eventually, however, a second expedition led by Philocrates the son of Demeas conquered the island. The Athenians executed all the grown men who came into their hands and enslaved the children and women. The island was colonized by Athenian settlers and became Athens' dominion. The epilogue of the story narrated by Thucydides sounds like a dramatic representation of what is at stake in public decisions. Even more, the destruction of Melos serves as a warning about the conditions of human decision-making. The closing of the doors to the people and the decision taken by the decision-makers were not a guarantee of salvation for Melos. However, it would be wrong to think the opposite, that is, that the

rule of knowledge of the whole community would have guaranteed a better outcome than the rule of knowers. The point, as emphasized in the dissertation, is to make clear the real reach of knowledge, namely, the effective capacity of the episteme to guarantee people what they aspire to. Knowledge does not end the deliberation but enriches it and – at times – even complicates it. Episteme serves the activity of decision-makers but remains subordinate to, for example, their will to fall as free men before the invader. Knowledge guides choice, it does not make it avoidable.

### *Democracy and Episteme*

The insouciance of the citizenship represents the denial of the political agency that democracy recognizes, protects and institutionalizes. In this sense, democracy is an intrinsically militant paradigm, because it ensures a central role to the people by opening the door of public deliberation and making it accessible to anyone. As seen, according to the proceduralist perspective, democracy protects the equal freedom of citizens and defends the coexistence of conflicting and irreducible values. Democracy raises citizenship from a simple recipient of political decisions to a political actor acting *in the first person*. The decisions, however, impose, as seen even in the case of Melos, an epistemic burden. In representative democracy, much of that burden rests on the shoulders of elected representatives and the administrative apparatus supporting them. If, however, the spread of epistemic insouciance among the people ceases to be perceived as a problem, the systematization of a disengaged and distracted democracy is at the door and, with it, democracy's element of vitality and justification is under siege.

The ability of citizens to understand the world, to reflect based on modest factual data is the social demonstration that all the individuals involved are referring to the same world. The convergence on modest but shared truths is the condition of a subsequent divergence on the basis of different values, experiences and interests. The episteme,

the rule of knowledge, is one of the unifying forces of democracy which, in itself, instead theorizes the legitimacy of a divided and different society. Rodgers rightly noted that, where truths are utterly free to be individually chosen the social disintegrates. This is especially true of democratic society. If there is no willingness of the demos to pour into the decision-making process its own understanding of the world and discuss the same reality that all the others share, democracy ends up assuming as a starting point an agency which, however, is instead perceived by people as an annoying burden.

The repudiation of the militancy that democracy assumes would lead to a disintegration of society into even more violent and radical factions than those already existing. If the empowerment of knowledge ceased to be a value, the community would find itself at the mercy of a “tyranny of claims”. In such a scenario, the impossibility of converging on the reality data would anticipate the impossibility of finding points of convergence in the face of disagreement on values and interests, and the deliberation would give way to an infinite clash between competing guilds. The interest in knowledge within democratic process embodies the concern that the people’s renunciation of being a decision-maker anticipates their destiny to become despot or subject.

### *Conservative Reformism*

Institutional solutions outlined in chapter 4 can appear in some respects modest. Compulsory voting, for example, already exists in several countries, yet it does not seem to have led to a civic-epistemic renaissance of democracy. Equally, the creation of expert agencies can appear as a rather weak remedy in view of greater involvement of the people. Above all, the work of the visible hand of the experts would seem to further facilitate the epistemic commitment of people already willing to acquire political knowledge and, therefore, to be “enlightened” political agents. In short, the proposals would end up convincing the convinced. In light of this skepticism, two brief considerations can be made.

First, it should be remembered that the present research collocates in field of democratic theory and does not at all exclude the existence of more adequate institutional tools to achieve the aims of “enlightened proceduralism”. Nonetheless, the combination of a strong stimulus to participation (compulsory voting) and the creation of a renowned agency for political education (visible hand) would represent a reforming pressure, even if perhaps not revolutionary, towards a more conscious democracy. In particular, attention to the formation of younger generations and the goal of forming a critical sense and interest in public affairs constitutes a frontier towards which immense energy and resources must be spent.

Second, as already mentioned, the institutional approach put in place in chapter 4 was marked by a conservative reformism. Compulsory voting and visible hand would be tools capable of having a significant, but not shocking, impact. In other words, such measures would require time and support to bear fruit and put democracy on the path of renewal under the banner of “enlightened” participation. The conservatism of the model lies in the reluctance to melt representative institutions as if they were “scrap metal”. The conviction, if anything, is the possibility of reinvigorating democracy without succumbing to the lure of ambitious but very demanding deliberative models. Maybe too demanding. From this perspective, it would be sufficient to recover popular militancy without abandoning the existing democratic and liberal paradigm. As Mazzucato wrote (Mazzucato 2014), the most extraordinary innovations, for example the iPhone, were made possible by risky investments fully supported by the States to develop very expensive technologies: the Internet, GPS, its touch-screen display and the voice-activated Siri. Following the same logic, the renewal of democracy will pass through a new and enlightened militancy of citizenship, but the nudge for this change could come from the vigor and support of existing institutions.

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