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On Epistocracy's Epistemic Problem: Reply to Méndez

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In a recent paper, María Pía Méndez (2022) offers an epistemic critique of epistocracy according to which the sort of politically well-informed but homogenous groups of citizens that would be empowered under epistocracy would lack reliable access to information about the preferences of less informed citizens. Specifically, they would lack access to such citizens' preferences regarding the *form* that policies ought to take—that is, how these policies ought to be implemented. Arguing that this so-called *Information Gap Problem* militates against epistocracy, Méndez instead recommends that we respond to problems created by widespread voter ignorance by improving the flow of information between political actors by adopting some participatory democratic institutions.

In this paper I argue that the severity of the Information Gap Problem for epistocracy is overstated. After first sketching some background (Section 1), I argue that it is hard to see why information about citizens' preferences for the form that policies ought to take is important enough that the expected costs of epistocracy outweigh its expected benefits *if* it selectively empowers people who lack access to such information (Section 2). Moreover, different forms of epistocracy are less threatened by the Information Gap Problem, assuming it is indeed a problem. For some forms of epistocracy, it may be no problem whatsoever. However, I conclude by suggesting that Méndez touches upon some more serious problems for epistocracy (Section 3). First, even setting aside the Information Gap Problem, there are open questions about the possible epistemic inferiority of epistocracy relative to democracy. Second, more comprehensive accounts of political competence that move beyond the possession of sufficient levels of political information are much harder to reliably test for, thus complicating the task of devising effective epistocratic selection mechanisms. Lastly, epistocracy arguably creates a serious risk of abuse that may outweigh any other benefits it brings. More research is needed to determine how (and whether) epistocrats can respond to such challenges.

Section 1: Epistocracy and the Information Gap Problem

Decades of empirical research shows that most voters are deeply ignorant of politically relevant facts.¹ Not only are they ignorant of potentially relevant social sciences (such as economics, political science, or sociology), they are even ignorant of basic facts related to the identity of their representatives, the structure and function of various important political institutions, and more.² Politically ignorant voters may end up supporting candidates they otherwise would not support if they were better informed, unwittingly voting against their interests. And political leaders are incentivized to respond to the political preferences of ignorant voters, at least to some degree. To paraphrase H.L. Mencken, voters know what they want and get it good and hard from politicians eager to pander to the electorate.

Worried about possible harmful effects of widespread political ignorance, many philosophers have recently defended *epistocracy*, a form of government where the possession of some

¹ See Caplan (2007), Brennan (2016), and Somin (2021) for overviews of the relevant empirical literature.

² For more on the distinction between putative social-scientific facts and so-called *basic political facts*, see Gibbons (2021).

amount of political information is a legal prerequisite of possessing political power of some kind (Brennan 2016; Mulligan 2018; Jones 2020).³ Although the institutional details often vary quite considerably from proposal to proposal, common to each epistocratic proposal is the assumption that well-informed people will make better (in some sense) decisions than their less-informed peers.⁴ By empowering such well-informed people, epistocrats hope to mitigate any damage caused by political ignorance. If proponents of epistocracy are right, it offers a form of government that is epistemically superior to democracy; and this epistemic superiority will, in turn, lead to better governance and better outcomes.

Naturally, such proposals have proven quite controversial. Many will object to them outright on the grounds that democracy is intrinsically just, regardless of its epistemic standing relative to epistocracy.⁵ Others, though, have tried to meet the epistocratic challenge head-on, claiming that epistocracy is epistemically inferior to democracy. The critique Méndez offers falls in this latter camp. Méndez claims that epistocratic restrictions on the franchise would leave only a homogenous group of elites empowered. Méndez grants that such elites would be able to choose appropriate *content* for laws and policies designed to satisfy certain ends (Méndez 2022, 2). However, she denies that they would possess information regarding how other less well-informed voters would prefer such laws and policies be implemented (9). In other words, a homogenous group of elites would lack information about the preferences of their less-informed peers regarding the *form* that laws and policies ought to take. Why is this important? Méndez claims that the input of even less-informed citizens is valuable because “it contains good information on general ways to undertake practical projects” (5).

If everybody had similar preferences regarding the form of laws and policies, this problem would not arise. But since the preferences of well-informed elites and their less-informed peers will presumably diverge on such matters, selectively empowering the former means that political decision-making processes will not benefit from the input of the latter. If such information is as valuable as Méndez suggests, this presents a problem for epistocratic proposals that empower people without reliable access to it. Epistocrats attempt to mitigate the harmful effects of an electorate ignorant of important information but end up precluding the use of a different type of information that may also be important. Accordingly, Méndez instead urges that we focus on improving the flow of information between political actors in democracies rather than transitioning to epistocracy (11).⁶

Section 2: Don't Mind the (Information) Gap

³ Manor (2022) defends a limited, hybrid form of epistocracy.

⁴ For a fascinating criticism of this assumption in the context of epistocracy, see Hannon (2022). See Gibbons (2022) for a response.

⁵ For a defense of the claim that democracy is intrinsically just, see Valentini (2013) and Kolodny (2014a; 2014b).

⁶ Méndez suggests that more participatory forms of democracy that involve institutions such as sortition and deliberative polls may improve the flow of relevant information, though what form these institutions should ultimately take is left underdeveloped.

However, there are several reasons to think that the severity of the Information Gap Problem for epistocracy is overstated. First, it is hard to see why information about the preferences of ill-informed citizens regarding the form that laws and policies ought to adopt is important for policymaking. Méndez claims it is important because such citizens can possess good information for general ways to undertake practical projects. Unfortunately, though, no further argument is given for this claim. Perhaps it is true in some broader sense, but its application to policymaking in particular is unclear. On its face, how to properly implement laws and policies such that they bring about their intended effects is something which requires substantial knowledge of politically relevant facts.⁷ But this, of course, is precisely what ill-informed citizens lack. Accordingly, even if such citizens possess *some* information that is helpful for policymaking (perhaps in virtue of their lived experience, as Méndez suggests on p10 of her article), they suffer from a corresponding dearth of another kind of information which seems equally as important, if not more so.

This brings us to a second reason to be skeptical of the significance of the Information Gap Problem. In order to count as a decisive objection to epistocracy, the severity of the Information Gap Problem needs to be great enough that it outweighs any potential gains made by epistocratic institutions over their democratic counterparts. The costs (if there are any) of lacking reliable access to information about the preferences of politically ill-informed citizens regarding the form of laws and policies needs to be balanced against the benefits (if there are any) of allocating greater amounts of political power to politically well-informed citizens. Even if the Information Gap Problem is a serious one, some form of epistocracy could yet be *all-things-considered* better than extant democratic institutions. Perhaps institutions suffer when they lack reliable access to the sort of information Méndez highlights. But if that suffering is offset by greater gains (by improving reliable access to other forms of politically relevant information), the Information Gap Problem is not a decisive objection to epistocracy.

Third, the overall distribution of costs and benefits is sensitive to the underlying institutional details of any given epistocratic proposal. For some forms of epistocracy, costs brought about by the Information Gap Problem may be greater than any benefits they bring. Perhaps information about the preferences of politically ill-informed citizens regarding the form of laws and policies is as important as Méndez suggests, and so forms of epistocracy such as restricted suffrage become less plausible to the extent that they cannot attain reliable access to such information.⁸ But other forms of epistocracy will be different. *Plural voting*, for

⁷ Indeed, this sort of task is highly difficult even for political experts. In general, producing accurate predictions about the downstream effects of various interventions into political systems is rendered extremely difficult by the complexity of the relevant domains. See Friedman (2019) and Reiss (2019; 2021) for relevant discussion.

⁸ Even here, though, there is reason to be skeptical of the severity of the Information Gap Problem. Méndez claims that under restricted suffrage only a homogenous group of elites would be empowered. Further, she claims that the preferences of this group of elites regarding the form of laws and policies would overlap little with the preferences of their politically ill-informed peers (Méndez 2022,10). But both claims are questionable. On the one hand, the extent to which epistocratic selection mechanisms would yield a homogenous body of elites is unclear. Under the sort of restricted suffrage Brennan (2016) outlines, the number of people capable of passing the relevant qualification exams will vary with the difficulty of the exams. Easier exams will allow more people to qualify, while harder exams will allow fewer to qualify. Importantly, Brennan suggests that to keep

instance, involves no electoral exclusion, and so political leaders will need to be at least somewhat responsive to the preferences of politically ill-informed citizens (though less responsive than they would be under universal suffrage without plural voting). For another, consider the *enfranchisement lottery* defended by López-Guerra (2014). Under this form of epistocracy, a representative sample of citizens selected at random via sortition will take part in competence-building processes before earning the right to vote.⁹ Since citizens will be chosen at random, it is unlikely that the enfranchisement lottery will feature disproportionate numbers of political elites with preferences radically unlike those of their less-informed peers. Lastly, consider the sort of *conservative epistocratic proposals* discussed in Gibbons (2022: 270-3).¹⁰ These are epistocratic institutions for which there exists a solid track record of superior performance relative to more democratic alternatives. For such institutions, lacking reliable access to information about the preferences of politically ill-informed citizens regarding the form of laws and policies is seemingly no obstacle. For conservative epistocratic institutions, then, the Information Gap Problem is not much of a problem.

Summing up: (1) the significance of the information Méndez highlights is unclear; (2) even if the Information Gap Problem were a serious one, epistocracies might still be all-things-considered better than their democratic alternatives; and (3) different forms of epistocracy will face less costs from the Information Gap than others. Taken together, these three points count against the severity of the Information Gap Problem for epistocracy.

Section 3: Open Questions for Epistocrats

By itself, the Information Gap Problem is unlikely to count decisively against epistocracy. But perhaps in conjunction with other problems it can play a *contributory* role in a broader argument against epistocracy. First, there are open questions about the comparative epistemic standing of democracy and epistocracy. The costs highlighted by the Information Gap Problem are not steep enough to count against epistocracy, but together with other costs it could be that epistocracy is in fact epistemically inferior to democracy, contrary to the intentions of epistocrats. This possibility is familiar from the growing literature on epistemic democracy. Epistemic democrats argue that, under suitable conditions, collective intelligence can emerge from an electorate that is constituted by individually ignorant voters (Landemore 2013; Goodin and Spiekermann 2018). If true, this claim undercuts the primary motivation for epistocracy—namely, the desire to mitigate harms caused by widespread voter ignorance. It is important to note, though, that the arguments of epistemic democrats have been criticized by philosophers who observe that the various formal models they draw upon do not apply straightforwardly to actual democracies (Brennan 2016, 172-203; Houlou-

the test “objective and nonideological, we might limit it to basic facts and largely uncontested social scientific claims” (Brennan 2016, 212). In short, there are good procedural reasons for easier exams. But this means more people will qualify for the franchise. If so, the costs of the Information Gap problem shrink. On the other hand, the extent to which the preferences of elites regarding the form of laws and policies diverge from the preferences of politically ill-informed citizens is uncertain. Contrary to Méndez’s claims, there may be substantial overlap. Ultimately, determining how much overlap exists is an empirical question.

⁹ See also Brennan (2016, 214-5).

¹⁰ See also Jones (2020). For related discussion of what she calls *limited epistocracy*, see Jeffrey (2018).

Garcia, 2017; Hédoïn 2021, 7-8). However, recent work in democratic theory suggests that such arguments can be buttressed by appeal to a wider *empirical* literature that purports to document epistemic advantages that democratic institutions enjoy (van Bouwel 2022). Whether democratic institutions are epistemically superior to competing epistocratic institutions by drawing upon the wisdom of the masses is an empirical question. Nevertheless, the possibility that various epistemic drawbacks militate against epistocracy cannot be discounted. Perhaps the Information Gap Problem is one of these drawbacks.

Second, Méndez helpfully draws attention to the fact that it is crucial for epistocrats to develop an appropriate account of *political competence*. She understandably focuses on the possession of sufficient levels of politically relevant information, an important epistemic component of political competence that takes center stage in discussions of epistocratic selection mechanisms (Méndez 2022, 5-9). But in addition to the possession of sufficient information and the ability to reason well, there are other often overlooked components of political competence. For instance, in a forthcoming paper, Brian Kogelmann notes that political competence “also requires that persons possess moral knowledge about policies that may permissibly be implemented, as well as the motivation to act...in accordance with this knowledge” (Kogelmann forthcoming, 1).¹¹ However, he convincingly argues that it is considerably more difficult to test for such components of political competence than it is to test for levels of political information. But if this is correct, epistocratic selection mechanisms may not be able to ensure that the political power of politically competent people is amplified. In short, by paying attention to the many dimensions of political competence we can see that efforts to improve governance by empowering the competent is far more complex than one might initially think.¹²

Lastly, Méndez discusses the possibility that the process of determining what content to include in epistocratic qualification exams could be subverted or manipulated (Méndez 2022, 8). Notably, though, she claims that such a possibility does not place too much pressure on epistocrats since measures could be adopted to prevent or mitigate the risk of subversion or manipulation (8). In principle, I think this suggestion is correct, and institutional mechanisms could be devised to prevent or mitigate the risk that epistocratic selection mechanisms are abused or become corrupt. But in practice, safeguarding epistocratic institutions against abuse or manipulation by self-interested actors presents a tremendously difficult problem that epistocrats cannot reasonably ignore. Indeed, worries related to risk of abuse are one of the more common objections to epistocracy (Bagg 2018; Klockslem 2019; Vandamme 2020; Somin 2022).¹³ If it is true that democratic institutions are more easily safeguarded against

¹¹ See also Brennan (2011) for a recognition of the fact that in order to wield political power competently one must (among other things) do so in a morally reasonable manner.

¹² With that said, epistocrats might naturally respond by observing that democratic selection mechanisms face this challenge too—namely, they cannot ensure that the political power of politically competent people is amplified, and they cannot thereby ensure good governance. As Kogelmann concludes, whether imperfect epistocracy is all-things-considered better than imperfect democracy (or vice-versa) is an empirical question in need of further research (Kogelmann forthcoming, 2).

¹³ Landemore even goes as far as to describe the problem of abuse or corruption as “probably the most straightforward argument against epistocracies” (Brennan and Landemore 2022, 180).

abuse or corruption than competing epistocratic institutions, then this constitutes an important instrumental advantage of democracy over epistocracy.¹⁴ And if the costs of corruption and abuse are sufficiently high, then they could outweigh any epistemic benefits that epistocratic institutions otherwise may deliver.

It is currently unclear whether these problems together count decisively against epistocracy. Perhaps epistocrats can convincingly address them, or perhaps these problems are insurmountable. Such issues involve several complicated open questions which those interested in political epistemology, democratic theory, and institutional design ought to seriously consider in future research. Thus, while the Information Gap Problem is unlikely to be one of these more serious problems, Méndez touches upon several others which epistocrats need to address before some form of epistocracy is seen as a viable institutional alternative to extant democratic institutions.

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¹⁴ For related discussion of such issues, see Malcolm (forthcoming).

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