Democracy and Knowledge: Remarks on Brennan and Wikforss

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Abstract
We take up Jason Brennan's critique of democracy as formulated in his monograph *Against Democracy* (2016) and discuss the arguments that Åsa Wikforss presents against Brennan's views in her book *Därför demokrati* (2021). Both authors grant the importance of knowledge for political decision-making, but they differ in their respective understandings of what counts as knowledge and they draw very different conclusions from the relevant knowledge requirement. Our general aim is to detect problems in democracy as well as in attempts to criticize democracy. We also briefly consider Brennan's positive proposal to replace democracy by "epistocracy", a form of government according to which only those citizens are entitled to vote who are "competent" in a sense to be discussed. Our aim is not to propagate any particular form of government. We merely wish to help the reader to recognize that democracy in particular involves a whole lot of assumptions that are in need of a better justification than what is normally provided.

Keywords: collective decision-making, competence, electoral psychology, epistocracy, preference

1. Introduction

This article is about the role of knowledge, broadly construed, as a prerequisite of political decision-making, especially in connection with democracy. We approach the theme by discussing the critique of democracy and the defense of epistocracy that Jason Brennan puts forward in his monograph *Against Democracy* (2016), and the arguments that Åsa Wikforss directs against Brennan's views in her book *Därför demokrati* [Therefore Democracy] (2021).[1]

[1] Jason Brennan: *Against Democracy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. Åsa Wikforss (with contributions from Mårten Wikforss): *Därför demokrati*, Stockholm: Fri tanke, 2021.

When discussing democracy, we rely on the characterization of democracy as the form of government in which all adult citizens have equal voting rights. The main aspect of democracy we intend to discuss is universal and equal suffrage. This is in contrast with epistocracy, which rests on a limitation of voting rights. According to epistocracy, only "politically competent" citizens should be allowed to vote. While democracy is a widespread form of government with different variations, epistocracy has not been implemented. For this reason, we do not consider different forms of democracy, but concentrate our observations on the main divide between democracy and epistocracy (the choice about who has the right to vote).

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, we argue that the notion of democracy has a *formal* and a *substantial* aspect, and that there is a tension between the two. The distinction will guide our analysis. Being democratic is a *formal* constraint on a collective decision-making method, but still decisions made using such a method are expected to fulfill certain *substantial* conditions. We will see why this is problematic. In Section 3, we provide an analytical discussion of the reasons why Brennan criticizes democracy. We describe his analysis of certain knowledge-related defects that he takes voters to have. According to Brennan, these defects constitute a problem for democracy as a political decision-making method and result in making democracy an unjust form of government. Brennan's positive recommendation is that we should experiment with epistocracy. We then assess in Section 4 the critique that Wikforss directs against Brennan's argumentation. We describe the features she sees as characteristic of Brennan's epistocracy and discuss her reactions against them. While Wikforss rejects epistocracy, she admits indeed the importance of knowledge for democracy and suggests that the state is to blame if citizens are not sufficiently competent to optimally take part in political decision-making. We discuss the relevance and justification of this *strategy of portraying citizens as victims*.

In Section 5, we take as our starting point the fact that decision-making has always two components: *preferences* (what one wants) and their *evaluation*. The evaluative component concerns the question of the *means* required for attaining what one wants, as well as the question of what would be the *consequences* if one's wishes were fulfilled. If the evaluation of preferences leads one to realize for example that no suitable means are available or that one's wishes have negative overall consequences, the preferences may get modified. The two components of decision-making may be respectively referred to as the *conative* and the *cognitive* aspect of decision-making. We discuss the dilemma created by the fact that it appears

difficult for a form of government to take appropriately into account both of these aspects. Epistocracy focuses on the latter at the expense of the former—and conversely, democracy focuses on the former at the expense of the latter. Wikforss points out that having such-and-such preferences is not a matter of competence (at least not unless we adopt moral realism and postulate the existence of moral facts), which indeed creates a problem for the epistocrat to explain how those preferences are fixed that may then be evaluated and processed with the aid of competence. On the other hand, while it is an inbuilt feature of democracy that the decision-making process makes essential use of the citizens' preferences, the choice of the expressed preferences does not require cognitive evaluation—which may lead to problems of the sort described by Brennan concerning democracy.

The general goal of this article is to contribute to an understanding of the nature of democracy. Such an understanding requires taking into account possible consequences of a democratic form of government: whatever is entailed or even left open by a given form of government partly determines its nature. Here it is important not to get fixed on the mere description of how a form of government is supposed to be implemented (who is allowed to make which political decisions). It must be estimated what consequences such implementation may have in real-life circumstances. Thus, an analysis of democracy must identify problems this form of government may in fact create, as well as problems it may help avoid. And the same goes for the idea of epistocracy.

2. The basic challenge of democracy

Granted that democracy is seen as an instrument for obtaining certain sorts of political outcomes, it is a non-trivial empirical question whether it *is* indeed an instrument that is likely to produce those ends.[2] And should it turn out to be a good instrument, it is a non-trivial empirical task to detect the mechanisms that make it work. The requirement that a form of government be democratic is essentially a *formal* constraint—namely, the constraint that certain political decisions be made according to the majority rule. The desired consequences, again, are *substantial*—e.g., common good, justice, equality in this or that respect.[3] And there is no logical connection here: a majority

[2] For Brennan, any value that democracy has is purely instrumental. Wikforss agrees, at least for the sake of argument, to treat democracy as being an instrument. See., e.g., Brennan (2016, p. 14) and Wikforss (2021, p. 178). Brennan expressly rejects the idea that democracy would have either *symbolic* or *intrinsic* value. Cf. Brennan (2016, pp. 10–11). In this paper, we are interested in democracy as an instrument.

[3] It can be argued that more is needed for democracy than mere equal right to vote. As Wikforss (2021, pp. 37–39) notes, for example according to the "principle of political equality" formulated

decision may certainly generate injustice and inequality, and fail to trigger common good.

Thus, *being democratic* is not a logically sufficient condition for any of the substantial desiderata typically associated with democracy. For that matter, it is not a logically necessary condition either: nothing prevents just and equality-promoting political decisions being made in a state with a non-democratic form of government. Unless it is observed that the formal and substantial aspects of democracy are mutually independent, there is a great risk of conceptual confusion (e.g., people may link equal voting rights with decisions being just).

It is undeniable that the democratic formal constraint on how political decisions are made cannot, by itself, guarantee that consequences of those decisions meet some specified substantial conditions. This said, there are at least two factors that might facilitate meeting such conditions: the *context* in which the political decisions are made (including, notably, certain institutions that are meant to be relatively stable and that provide a framework for the functioning of the state) and the eventual *limitations on the content* of the decisions (notably those imposed by existing legislation). It might, then, happen that certain substantial outcomes that are not guaranteed by the mere fact that the majority rule is applied, in fact *are* guaranteed, or become at least likely, when a certain institutional context is given and when the alternatives among which choices are made are limited in a certain way.

To be sure, the role of institutions and the role of limitations on decision-making can be democratically changed, but on any given occasion some such boundary conditions are in place. This said, when discussing the advantages and problems of democracy, it is, for the sake of argument, interesting to assume, at least initially, as little as possible regarding those boundary conditions. This allows us to see more clearly what can ensue from the very fact that people at large get to participate in political decisions. Further, insofar as we wish to study the nature of democracy in the formal sense, we must firmly resist the temptation of assuming, overtly or covertly, that democratic decisions as such must meet important substantial conditions (say, promoting pluralism in some sense) merely to be qualifiable as democratic. Generally, no limitations must be assumed that are not produced

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by Dahl (1989), certain substantial values must be respected (e.g., all people ought to have the same opportunities to acquire knowledge of relevant political alternatives and their consequences) and certain institutional conditions must be secured (regularly held elections, freedom of association, freedom of expression, freedom of the press). In this paper we are, however, interested in the consequences of the core requirement of "electoral democracy" which simply grants all (adult) citizens equal right to vote.

by the democratic process itself—and therefore not codified in law. Otherwise it would remain unexplained how the basic formal constraint of democracy could have produced the relevant substantial requirements, and the discussion would be trivialized, since proceeding thus would allow all parties of the discussion to fix their favorite substantial conditions in advance, and no room would be left for analytic discussion.

3. Brennan's critique of democracy

The starting point for Brennan's discussion is the observation according to which in real-life circumstances, democratic decision-making may not be a suitable tool for such substantive objectives as promoting justice or protecting civil and economic rights.[4] He maintains that the value of a system of government depends on its consequences. In particular, for him democracy is a means to an end, not an end in itself, and any value that democracy has stems from its consequences.[5] Suppose for a moment that we have come to agree on what "good" political outcomes are. If X and Y are two systems of government, X *performs better* than Y if attempts to implement X are more likely to lead to "good" political outcomes than attempts to implement Y. The functioning of a system of government depends *partly* on the quality of the outcomes it in practice produces, and *partly* on the mechanism by which it produces its outcomes. Democracy is a system of government in which citizens have equal political power in certain decisions by means of their right to vote—e.g., electing the parliament. The corresponding mechanism consists of determining a collective decision based on individual citizens' voting behavior, the collective decision being the *immediate* outcome of the vote—e.g., certain individuals elected as MPs. In the example, the *overall* outcome of the vote depends on the actions taken by the MPs during their mandate period. Brennan holds that democratic governments typically perform better than the alternatives we have tried thus far, but he maintains that we should not accept the democratic power distribution unless it turns out to be *optimal*.[6] If a better-functioning system of government can be detected, we should opt for it. In the present paper, we are interested in identifying reasons why democracy might not be optimal—not in arguing for a form of government that could replace it.

[4] Brennan (2016), p. 131.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 14. Cf. footnote 2 above. It may be noted that even if one held that the value of democracy is not instrumental but is rather intrinsic or symbolic, as a form of government it would still have its practical consequences, and the character of these consequences could hardly be ignored when judging whether democracy is a recommendable form of government.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 8.

If a system of government is a tool, its success must, then, be judged by the outcomes it produces and by the mechanism it employs to produce them. It is a part of the political debate to discuss the criteria of what counts as a "good" outcome. As desirable features of policy outcomes Brennan considers substantial justice, civil and economic rights, as well as common good.[7] Thus, a well-performing system of government would employ a mechanism that promotes common good, protects civil and economic rights, and secures substantial justice. As a further feature of a well-functioning system Brennan names promoting all citizens' interests equitably. A system of government is of good quality if it employs a mechanism that tends to yield good outcomes.[8] In the case of democracy, this would mean that the citizens use their political power so that the policies the political decision-makers will adopt, and the laws they will make, in fact support the policy outcomes considered to be desirable.[9]

3.1. Informational defects and good intentions: empirical facts

Brennan criticizes democracy on the basis that the democratic decision-making method appears to be an unsuitable tool for attaining good outcomes. His criticism can be seen as an attempt to clarify the nature of democracy by laying bare the factors that affect the use of the democratic decision-making in real-life circumstances and create an important discrepancy between the rationally *expectable* consequences of democratic decisions and the outcomes that citizens *desire*. Basically, democracy takes individual preferences expressed by all citizens as a starting point and transforms them into society-level actions carried out by relevant political bodies. Here, the task is to understand whether governing a state can in some ways be negatively affected by such individual preferences being taken as a starting point—especially whether this way of proceeding may render it more difficult to attain goals that are judged good for the society by the very voters themselves. A very naive view of democracy might suggest that since democratic decision-making is based on all citizens' expressed preferences,

[7] *Ibid.*, pp. 117, 131, 144. Examples of civil rights are the rights of free speech and free association. Examples of economic rights, again, are freedom to purchase, trade and consume goods and services (without entering into conflict with law). Needless to say that the terms "justice" and "common good" as used here are highly schematic and need be rendered more precise when the success of a form of government is concretely evaluated.

[8] For equitable interest-promotion, see *ibid.*, p. 124. For a good-quality system of government, cf. *ibid.*, p. 138. This is an *internal* definition of being of good quality, phrased in terms of what citizens want. The outcomes labeled as "good" might be very bad indeed, objectively speaking.

[9] Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 50, 227–228.

the society-level result is thereby common good. This simplistic view is, however, utterly groundless. Brennan's discussion helps us see why.

Brennan states very clearly that he is interested in democracy as it can function in practice, not how it would function in idealized circumstances.[10] This is undoubtedly a reasonable approach: if for practical reasons democracy turned out to be doomed to failure, it would be a cold comfort that in idealized conditions it would work excellently. Brennan wishes to analyze political participation and political power exercised by real people with their factual defects. Merits and demerits of democracy must be judged on the basis of "what human beings are like, what democratic participation does to us, and what problems mass political participation is likely to solve—or *create*".[11] Due attention must, then, be paid to voter psychology. Brennan states that the following are empirical facts about the electorate; the empirical studies on which he bases his analysis concern specifically the US:

• Regarding politics, most citizens are ignorant, irrational, misinformed, and incompetent.

• Voters tend to be altruistic: they want to promote common good and they act for the perceived national interest.

Let us look at each of these five features in turn: (i) ignorance, (ii) irrationality, (iii) misinformedness, (iv) incompetence, and (v) altruism.[12]

(i) Ignorance or lack of political knowledge. Brennan remarks that in contemporary democracies, the average level of political knowledge has been shown to be very low, no matter how political knowledge is measured.[13] He cites loads of documented examples of ways in which the American voter is ignorant. As he notes, the robustness of this ignorance might seem surprising, given how easily information is available nowadays.[14] Upon reflection the situation is expectable: democracy does not incentivize people to be informed—the cost of acquiring political knowledge is much higher than any benefit it would yield.[15] To be sure, a usual well-meaning slogan states that every vote counts. In reality, it is almost certainly immaterial for the outcome

[10] *Ibid*., p. 19.
[11] *Ibid*., p. 3.
[12] *Ibid*., pp. 142, 230 [features (i)–(iv)]; *ibid*., p. 50 [feature (v)].
[13] *Ibid*., p. 14.
[14] *Ibid*., pp. 24–30.
[15] *Ibid*., pp. 34–35, 53.

of an election whether and how a given individual citizen votes.[16] When there are, say, two voting options, the vote of an individual citizen X would make a definite difference only if without it, the number of votes casted would be even and exactly half of the actual voters would have chosen one option, the other half having chosen the other option. In that case, had X voted, his or her vote would have broken a tie. Crucially, in no other case would X's contribution be decisive in determining the result of vote.[17] And for an individual citizen, it is statistically much more likely to win in a lottery than to be a tie-breaker. The economist Steven Landsburg has calculated that a person living in the US would have had better chances to win jackpot in Powerball lottery several times in a row than affecting the outcome of the 2004 presidential election in the US.[18] Now, an individual vote does not have any higher impact on the election result if the person casting it possesses political knowledge. Therefore, an individual citizen has rationally absolutely no incentive to acquire such knowledge. Acquiring information is costly. It requires personal effort. When the expected costs of acquiring information of a given kind exceed the expected benefits of possessing information of that kind, not only do people choose not to acquire such information, but their choice is *rational*.[19] Thus, citizens lacking political knowledge are, in fact, *rationally ignorant*: the cost of any effort to acquire political knowledge would exceed the next-to-zero benefit this knowledge would yield regarding the possibility of affecting the outcome of an election.

(ii) Political irrationality. Brennan notes that there is an overwhelming consensus in political psychology that the ways in which most citizens process political information is deeply biased, partisan, and motivated rather than dispassionate and rational.[20] In short, people are politically irrational. It should be observed that here irrationality qualifies the way in which people process information about politics. This sort of irrationality is perfectly compatible with the same citizens' being rational in not acquiring political

[16] This is of course not to deny that all votes genuinely contribute to determine the total set of votes casted, and thereby affect the outcome of the election. But a single vote has such a vanishingly small effect that it is extremely unlikely that a particular person's decision to vote or not to vote would change the outcome of the election.

[17] *Ibid*., p. 31. X's vote would also make a difference if without it, the number of votes casted would be odd in such a way that n voters would have chosen one option and $n+1$ voters the other option. In that case X could *impose a tie*, which would be broken possibly by a random choice among the two options. However, in this case X's action would not be decisive: the vote X casts would not determine a definite outcome.

[18] Landsburg (2004).

[19] *Ibid*., p. 30.

[20] *Ibid*., p. 37.

knowledge. In the latter case, the question is whether to take action to improve one's cognitive state by resorting to an external source, whereas what is at stake in the former case is how one deals with political information one has or gets (with or without effort). For that matter, since people have weak incentives to overcome their cognitive biases, they are rational in not taking the costly effort of trying to remove irrational aspects in their information processing habits. In this sense, not only is their lack of knowledge rational, but even their political irrationality itself is instrumentally rational.[21]

(iii) Misinformedness or possession of erroneous political information. On the basis of empirical studies, Brennan points out that while the average level of political knowledge among American voters is low (most voters are ignorant), there is high variance: some voters are highly informed and some are *worse than ignorant* in the sense that their beliefs about politics are systematically erroneous.[22] Voters of the latter type do not just fail to have justified true beliefs about politics; they positively *have* systematic erroneous beliefs. These voters reply erroneously to questions requiring social-scientific knowledge significantly more often that they would if they chose how to answer by flipping a coin.[23]

(iv) Incompetence. Brennan is interested in competence as a property of decision-making. By "competent decision" he does *not* mean a decision whose substantive content would in some sense be correct.[24] Whether *what* is decided can be qualified in terms of correctness in the first place does not affect the question of whether the decision is made competently. Competence is about *the way in which a decision is made*—what counts is *how* one decides. Competence is about the means employed to reach a decision. Brennan does not intend to fix a rigid notion of competence. Rather, his notion is somewhat schematic, capable of being rendered more precise in different ways. He maintains that he only needs to rely on relatively uncontroversial platitudes about competence—indeed, what really matters to him is that there is a division between competent and incompetent decisions. We might indeed well have a good enough grasp of what belongs to which side of such a division without being able to pinpoint exactly the line of

[21] *Ibid*., pp. 48–49.
[22] *Ibid*., p. 32.
[23] *Ibid*., pp. 51, 84; cf. p. 194.
[24] *Ibid*., p. 155.

demarcation between the two sides.[25] Brennan puts forward a moderate view of conditions that democratically made decisions must meet in order to be competently made: (a) the voters act on widely available, good information—not necessarily the best information that could in principle be found; (b) they avoid superstitions and systematic error; (c) they evaluate information in a moderately rational and unbiased way; and (d) they are aware of their own limits and always look for more and better information on any important decision.[26] Thus, to make a decision competently, a voter must succeed in settling on a relevant amount of good-quality information to be used as a basis of the decision and he or she must be able to process such information rationally to be in a position to judge what to decide.

It is important to note that one is far from being competent to make important political decisions simply on the basis of *desiring* a certain outcome. People may know what outcomes would serve the interests they find important to promote, but this does not mean that people would—by virtue of birth or residency alone—be competent to make high-stakes political decisions whose goal would be such interest-promotion.[27] What one wants is undeniably a crucial aspect of decision-making (and it will be seen in Section 5 that Brennan may not give sufficient attention to it), but one's desires are just a driving-force of decision-making. This driving-force must be controlled and channelled suitably before it can lead to a competently made decision. To that end, one must evaluate whether the outcome really is desirable in view of the information one must gather regarding the relevant issue, and one must reflect on whether and how the desired goal can be attained.

When citizens vote for electing a candidate, they have preferences of two kinds. Their *outcome preferences* are about the consequences they want the candidates to produce, while their *policy preferences* concern the policies and laws they want the candidates to support.[28] A necessary condition for the competence of a voter is that his or her outcome preferences and policy preferences are suitably interrelated. Not only must they be mutually compatible, but one's preferred policies must—according to the relevant information one can reasonably acquire—actually render likely the attaining of one's preferred outcomes. Imagine the following situation.[29] Voters X and Y both wish that economic growth was stimulated (their common outcome

[25] *Ibid*., p. 162.
[26] *Ibid*., p. 165.
[27] Cf. *ibid*., pp. 138, 227.
[28] *Ibid*., p. 50.
[29] Cf. *ibid*., pp. 50–51.

preference). They must choose a candidate: Republican or Democrat. Suppose that Republicans sincerely believe that cutting taxes and government spending would be a suitable means to stimulate economic growth, while Democrats sincerely believe that increasing taxes and spending would be a means to that end (the two parties actually held these beliefs in 2008). Of course, they cannot both be right. Since Republicans and Democrats both aim at stimulating economic growth, X and Y choose who to vote depending on how they want their candidate to pursue this goal. Suppose X supports the method proposed by Republicans and Y the method proposed by Democrats. Then at least one of the two—X or Y—makes an incompetent voting decision, since both methods cannot reasonably be expected to work in the same circumstances.

As Brennan notes, people may mistakenly believe that a policy will promote their favored outcomes, while in fact the policy undermines those outcomes. Indeed, a great amount of social-scientific knowledge may be required to assess how proposed policies are related to desired outcomes.[30] One thing that actually makes it difficult to vote competently when voting for a candidate is that the choice will simultaneously express preferences of both kinds (outcome preferences and policy preferences), and it is a difficult task to know whether the two types of preferences associated with a given candidate are at least coherent, let alone if they are mutually supporting. The voter is automatically giving his or her approval to the outcomes the candidate announces to promote *and* to the means the candidate announces to employ for attaining them. Whether the candidates sincerely believe what they say or not, it takes competence on the part of the voter to judge whether the policies the candidate wishes to put into practice in fact support the desired outcome.[31] In her critical discussion of epistocracy, María Pía Méndez refers to the potentially problematic relationship between citizens' outcome preferences and the means they would choose to foster them as the *Preferences/Means Discrepancy*.[32] She sees clearly that epistocrats like Brennan view this problem as lying at the heart of their critique of democracy.

[30] *Ibid*., pp. 51, 227.

[31] This is not merely a problem of representative democracy. No matter how a decision is made (by deliberation with massive participation on the part of the citizens, by a dictator, by a knowledgeable portion of the citizenry), the decision aims at something and should at least be accompanied with a realization plan. The two may be in conflict, and it takes competence to find out what their relationship in fact is.

[32] Méndez (2021), pp. 155–156. In addition to Brennan, she refers to Ahlström-Vij (2019) for this view on epistocracy.

(v) Altruism. Brennan remarks that according to empirical studies on voter behavior, voters do not vote selfishly—they vote for what they *perceive* to be common good or in the national interest.[33] Most voters genuinely want to help and sincerely believe they vote in ways that make things better for their fellow citizens. More specifically, voters tend to want their elected officials to serve the common good of their country rather than their narrow self-interest on the one hand, or the common good of the entire world, on the other.[34] Brennan notes that this sort of altruism is surprising, given that people are predominantly selfish in their daily lives. Referring to the fact that a single citizen's benefit for casting a fixed vote is zero, an explanation is forthcoming: a rational selfish person would not vote in the first place, since the cost of voting—selfishly or not—is higher than simply not voting. So if one hopes to promote maximally one's personal interests, it is cost-effective to do something more rewarding than voting.[35] Thus, if one votes, one is either irrational or votes altruistically. Voting altruistically has next-to-zero effect, as does voting associated with whatever intention, but on the other hand it is not more costly than voting selfishly. If a voter is rational and decides to vote, he or she will tend to do so with the intention of acting in common interest. This of course does not mean that in so doing the voter *succeeds* in promoting the common good. After all, most voters are highly incompetent. It may well happen that the alternative the citizen votes for would not in reality lead to common good by any standards, despite the good intentions of the voter. In particular, one might easily end up voting for an incoherent or otherwise unsuccessful combination of outcome preferences and policy preferences, by voting for a candidate whose intention is to bring about a desired outcome but whose chosen policies are mistaken or inapplicable.[36]

3.2. Implications of voter psychology to democratic decision-making

It was noted above that according to empirical studies, voters indeed tend to have the five features (i)–(v) discussed in Section 3.1. What does this mean for democracy as a form of government? One might surmise that notably the effect of the first four features is negative. Or could it be that the voters' cognitive imperfections do not hinder in the least the consequences of democratic decisions from being of good quality?

[33] *Ibid*., pp. 49–50, 120, 227.
[34] *Ibid*., pp. 235, 50.
[35] Cf. *ibid*., p. 50.
[36] *Ibid*., pp. 50–51.

A democratically made decision has the characteristic that it is a decision that is made by a *group* (the majority of the moment) based on votes cast by *individuals* (the voters) with their individual motivations, and by means of the decision the group exercises political power on *all citizens*. Indeed, democratic decisions differ in two ways from decisions individuals typically make. First, in a decision an individual makes, the entity to whom the decision is imputed is the same as the entity whose motivations and judgment determine the decision. In any collective decision (including democratic decisions), it is a group who decides but the decision is determined by a plurality of individuals with individual motivations and personal judgment. Second, unlike decisions made by individuals and unlike some collective decisions, democratic decisions are imposed on all citizens, not only on the members of the group who determines the decision. Consequently, it is very important *not* to view an electorate on the model of an individual. Brennan indeed stresses that an electorate is a collection of individuals with separate goals, behaviors and intellectual credentials—not a unified body.[37] Facts about possible decisions of individuals—and rights of individuals to make certain decisions—cannot, without further ado, be extrapolated so as to apply to the electorate as a whole. An individual may choose to act in ways that make it likely that he or she dies of heart attack. In this case, the one who judges what to do, the one who decides, and the one who bears the consequences are one and the same entity (if the possible burden to the healthcare system is ignored). Here, it is not unreasonable to maintain that the person has the right to act in that way. The right to eat oneself into heart attack yields people power over themselves. The right to vote, again, is a right to exercise *power over others*.[38] To justify one's right to eat oneself to death, we must merely explain why individuals must be allowed to harm themselves. Democratic political decisions can have devastating consequences on all citizens; they may lead, say, to unjust policies, civil unrest, unjust wars, economic crises, and great poverty. This is why Brennan says that democracy is an unjust form of government: innocent people are exposed to high degrees of risk, since their fate is in the hands of voters who, as shown, are ignorant, misinformed, irrational, and incompetent decision-makers.[39] To justify the right to vote, we should, then, explain why individuals must be allowed to harm others—to impose incompetently made decisions on others.[40]

[37] *Ibid*., p. 9.
[38] *Ibid*., p. 10.
[39] *Ibid*., pp. 123, 230.
[40] *Ibid*., p. 9.

Let us consider more carefully the democratic decision-making mechanism that turns individual actions into a collective decision binding everyone involved. On the one hand, certain *aspects* of decision-making have nothing much to do with the voters' competence—what the voters *want* is not, as such, a matter of anyone's knowledge (e.g., the interests the voters wish to promote, and the issues they think should fall within the scope of political oversight and regulation).[41] On the other hand, the consequences of a collective decision do not just depend on what the voters' intentions are; they also depend on what policies the voters end up supporting by means of casting a specific vote, and they depend on the factual circumstances in which the decision is made. It takes competence to select suitable methods for aiming at a given goal, and to become aware of the constraints that the factual circumstances impose. To understand the risks involved in democratic decision-making, attention must be paid to the huge distance between an individual voter's action and the collective decision determined by the joint actions of the voters. This huge distance is simply due to the fact that the number of voters is huge. And the fact that there is only a very weak connection between an individual voter's act of voting and the collective decision means that the (rational) voter has little incentive to vote responsibly: to acquire new information, apply self-criticism, improve one's information-processing habits—in short, to decide in a competent fashion (which is not a constraint on *what* one *wishes* to accomplish, only on *how* one attempts to achieve it).[42] As this incentive is lacking, in practice the outcome of the collective decision will depend on instinctive or otherwise unreflected reactions of the voters.

It cannot, then, be coherently maintained that the success of a democratic decision would be entirely independent of voters' cognitive competence. Neither can it be credibly maintained that people simply have an innate capacity to judge how given outcome preferences are related to proposed policy preferences in fixed factual circumstances. The psychological basis of individuals' voting behavior is undoubtedly something much less involved than the application of complicated cognitive processes. In his book *Persoonallisuus*, the Finnish philosopher and psychologist Eino Kaila remarked that opinions about the state and politics pertain to "things that from the theoretical viewpoint are among the most difficult and in connection with which only the highest levels of specialized knowledge may have any substantial value" and yet, he continues, the average individual adopts his or

[41] This said, even desires (preferences) should not be immune to the use of reason. Rational agents will allow their instinctive desires to be modified in light of reflection.
[42] *Ibid*., p. 52.

her opinions of these matters without any hesitation—that is, without appreciating their theoretical difficulty and without arriving at those views through careful reflection.[43] By strictly rational standards, adopting such views in this way would be entirely out of place. Kaila notes, however, that individuals behave in this way because "their needs dictate these opinions to them". People adopt views that allow them to see themselves in a maximally positive light and appear to serve their needs—and ignore any complications that a properly rational agent would have to take into account because of the objective difficulty of these issues.[44] If even such relatively general opinions as views on the state and politics are so straightforwardly adopted, it is hardly surprising that an individual's voting behavior on a single voting situation is not accompanied with particularly much reflection. It is indeed essentially based on a recognition of what one wants—which itself is not the outcome of a cognitive process, but precisely dictated by thinking habits one has already acquired. If this situation is described by saying that people typically lack judgment in political matters, it is not to say that people would be unable to recognize what they want, just that what they want is not the outcome of a rational cognitive process proceeding from the acquisition of empirical data relevant for the case at hand, and involving careful reflection and rational processing.

The fact that democracy allows the input of the democratic decision-making process to consist of citizens' expressions of opinion that need not be obtained via any demanding cognitive process is, then, a potential problem for this form of government. It involves consciously giving up competently made decisions—whether this is justified by suggesting that no competence is needed or because it is judged that proceeding in this way is useful, say, for maintaining social peace.[45] Plato criticized this feature of democracy in *The*

[43] Kaila (1934), p. 252.

[44] See *ibid*., pp. 251–253.

[45] It is conceivable that competence is an emergent property of the democratic decision-making process, so that the citizenry as a whole would be competent to make political decisions even if the majority of individual citizens were incompetent. This is the case according to the so-called "epistemic argument" for democracy, which states that under suitable conditions, very large groups of voters perform collectively well even though individual group members are ignorant—and perform possibly even better than a restricted electorate consisting of competent citizens. For a discussion, see Brennan (2016), Chap. 7; Wikforss (2021), pp. 165–169. Those who wish to adopt the "epistemic argument", typically seek support from such mathematical theorems as *Miracle of aggregation theorem*, *Condorcet's jury theorem* or *Hong-Page theorem*; cf., e.g., Brennan (2016), pp. 173–174. These theorems express facts about large electorates under certain assumptions. In particular, the theorems assume that no large groups of voters are systematically mistaken, and they assume that there is such a thing as choosing the "correct alternative" when voting. The former assumption appears to be false as a matter of psychological fact, and the

Republic (558b), remarking that democracy displays contempt for the idea that only someone having patiently undergone a long-term preparation is suitable for holding a political office. Democracy pretends, instead, that independently of the kind of life one has led, one can enter political life. Whatever are the precise psychological mechanisms regulating voting behavior, it seems difficult to deny that rational information-processing and thorough information seeking would tend to be beneficial for the consequences of democratic decisions. At the same time it appears undeniable that many voters lack perhaps even the capacity, but at least the incentive to undertake such processing and seeking when deciding which voting option to choose. If so, democracy has an important inbuilt problem as a method for deciding on how to govern a state.[46]

4. Wikforss's critique of Brennan

Brennan's positive solution to the problems he detects regarding democracy is that we should experiment with a form of government in which only *competent* citizens are allowed to vote.[47] Here, "competence" is to be understood as discussed in Section 3.1. Such competence can be seen as a kind of knowledge (*epistêmê*) and Brennan indeed refers to the relevant form of government as "epistocracy" ("rule based on knowledge"). We recall that in order for the electorate to be competent in Brennan's sense, the voters must attempt to acquire a relevant amount of good-quality information to be used as a basis of their decisions, they must process such information rationally, and they must be self-critical. The criterion is *not* about the correctness of decisions (if a decision even could be qualified as such), but about the manner in which the voters arrive at their decisions.

Wikforss criticizes Brennan's version of epistocracy as an alternative to democracy and plays down the importance of the problems Brennan detects in the democratic form of government. She agrees, however, that knowledge

latter seems to be conceptually out of place, since the preferences expressed by votes do not belong to the realm of true and false, but to the realm of what one wants or does not want. We leave a closer consideration of the possibility of emergent competence to another occasion.

[46] For various reasons it may be that the overall situation could not be improved—i.e., that replacing democracy by another form of government would give rise to much worse overall consequences. And given our psychological limitations, it is not clear that democracy itself could be improved.

[47] See, e.g., Brennan (2016), pp. 8, 16, 230. Brennan by no means underestimates the practical difficulty of implementing epistocracy. And he is aware that like democracies, also epistocracies would suffer abuse, scandal, and government failure. The question is: which system, in these imperfect real-world conditions, would produce "better" outcomes (i.e., would better promote common good, better protect civil and economic rights, and better secure substantial justice). See *ibid*., pp. 206–207.

has an important role in democracy. In particular, she maintains that there is a two-way dependence: the functioning of democracy requires knowledge, and robust development of knowledge requires democratic institutions.[48] Her account of the relation between knowledge and democracy is, however, very different from Brennan's.

4.1. Technocracy vs. epistocracy

Wikforss assimilates epistocracy with *expert rule* [expertväldet],[49] which, in turn, is usually taken to be the same as technocracy—literally, *rule based on skill*. Such assimilations are problematic at least at the heuristic level: the difference between *epistêmê* and *technê* is well-established, and interpreting the competence requirement characteristic of Brennan's epistocracy as a requirement of expertise may lead thoughts to the wrong direction. Whether the employed terminology really is problematic depends, of course, on whether competence of the sort Brennan speaks about actually gets misconstrued due to its being treated as a case of expertise.

In his book *How Democracy Ends*, the political scientist David Runciman stresses the importance of not confusing epistocracy with technocracy. Let us first see how he characterizes epistocracy and democracy. Runciman describes epistocracy as a form of government in which only those citizens have the right to participate in political decision-making who "know what they are doing"—i.e., are capable to evaluate the consequences of their votes. In democracy, again, it does not matter according to Runciman whether citizens know what they are doing. That is, under universal suffrage, people need not be able to evaluate the consequences of how they vote. By contrast, they must accept to live with those consequences. Everyone's right to vote goes hand in hand with everyone's obligation to live with the consequences of how he or she votes.[50] Runciman adds to his notion of epistocracy even the idea that members of the epistocratic electorate try to work out where the society *should* be going and attempt to find out what is the *best* thing to do in a voting situation.[51] Thus, those citizens who are allowed to vote in an epistocracy in Runciman's sense evaluate not just the means needed to attain given desired outcomes, and consequences of such outcomes, but even formulate value judgments on alternative outcomes that people might desire. Now, Runciman expresses the distinction between epistocracy and technocracy in a rather simplified manner by saying that epistocracy means

[48] Wikforss (2021), p. 262.
[49] *Ibid*., pp. 157–159.
[50] Runciman (2018b), pp. 178–179.
[51] *Ibid*., pp. 181.

rule by the people who know best, whereas technocracy is rule by mechanics and engineers.[52] In this sense, a technocrat is someone who knows how a given machinery (e.g., an economic system) works and is capable of keeping it working—which does not require any considerations as to what would be an optimal course of action for the society (as Runciman says, keeping the machine running might be the worst thing to do). While epistocracy is an alternative to democracy and incompatible with it, Runciman sees technocracy rather as an add-on: there is space for technocracy *within* democracy.[53]

Runciman thinks we should reject epistocracy and stay with democracy, though regarding democracy he agrees with Brennan when saying:[54] "The trouble with democracy is that it gives us no reason to become better informed. It tells us we are fine as we are. And we're not."

Runciman sees two main problems with epistocracy. First, rather than looking for the best thing to do, he says we should content ourselves with avoiding the worst. According to him, democracy with its randomness—citizens constantly changing their mind—is good at the latter. And even the most competent people are fallible, whence tying power to knowledge could lead to an uncontrollable risk. Runciman says knowledge can be oppressing in a way that ignorance and foolishness cannot: incompetent decision-makers are likely to change their minds before the consequences of their decisions get oppressing.[55] Second, Runciman reflects on the following hypothetical situation. Imagine we tried to implement epistocracy by devising an algorithm that would take as input a voter's personal preferences and yield as output instructions about how to vote, those instructions being based on inferring a policy that optimally matches the outcomes desired by the voter and that would be pursued with an optimal likelihood if the voter casts his or her vote according to the recommendation of the algorithm. The algorithm would be supposed to help the voter to make an optimal choice by the voter's own standards. The idea would be, then, that the algorithm produces mechanically a certain voting recommendation depending on the citizen's outcome preferences, and this would, by hypothesis, be the same recommendation that a group of competent persons would provide corresponding to those outcome preferences. For each single citizen

[52] *Ibid*., pp. 180–181.
[53] *Ibid*., p. 181.
[54] *Ibid*., p. 185.
[55] *Ibid*., pp. 186–187.

separately, the algorithm would do the job of the epistocratic electorate.[56] Here the problem would be that even competent voters would have no control over the way the algorithm works; those ultimately holding the power would be those who created the algorithm, whence this attempt to implement epistocracy would actually collapse into technocracy.[57]

The result of technocracy in Runciman's sense would be that politically important decisions are based on expert knowledge (of a kind meeting scientific standards) about a specialized topic. Runciman's notion of epistocracy differs from the way in which Brennan sees it. Brennan is not, at least not directly, suggesting that being competent in the sense relevant for epistocratic decision-making would entail knowing what is best to do. For him, competence is measured in capacity to acquire relevant information, to apply self-criticism, and to process information rationally, in particular estimating the relationship of desired outcomes and available means for attaining them. Talking of goodness of the outcomes requires preferences and desires, and these are not sorts of things regarding which one could have expertise. Thus, Brennan's epistocracy does not count as epistocracy in Runciman's sense. Neither does Brennan's epistocracy amount to technocracy. To be sure, competence in Brennan's sense is not entirely independent of certain types of specialized knowledge (notably regarding economics and political science), but the role of competence is to allow informed reflection. Its role is not to implement a fixed goal with the help of expert knowledge (which is what a technocrat would do). That is, the aspects of epistocratic competence relying on certain types of theoretical knowledge are essentially related to one's ability to conceptualize what is at stake in a decision. Consequently, the form of government based on Brennan's competence requirement cannot be qualified as an expert rule in the sense of technocracy. Whether it can be qualified as expert rule in Wikforss's sense depends on what exactly Wikforss includes in her notion of expertise.

[56] There are different ways to implement the idea of epistocracy. Among them there are implementations that proceed from all citizens' preferences. One specific way of processing those preferences, arguably compatible with epistocracy, might be as follows. First, for each citizen separately, find an optimal policy for realizing the outcome preferences of that citizen. Consider the citizen as having voted for a candidate most likely to follow that policy. Second, determine the overall result of the election on the basis of the votes the candidates get in this way. The algorithm sketched by Runciman would be a mechanic way of implementing this sort of political decision-making method. (It would be epistocratic only in a weak sense and would actually resemble democracy understood as discussed in Sect. 5.1. In particular, it would not correct citizens' outcome preferences in light of information the citizens lack but could acquire.) For a discussion on ways to put epistocracy into practice, see Sect. 5.3.

[57] *Ibid*., pp. 189–191.

4.2. How Wikforss sees Brennan's position

When taking up the idea of expert rule generally, Wikforss refers to the task of resolving expertise-demanding questions regarding the society—such as improving public health, education, and economy—and asks, rhetorically, why could decisions about such questions not be left exclusively to experts of the relevant areas (say physicians, people with pedagogical training, and economists).[58] An "expert" in this sense is a person who knows much about a specific domain—"knows" by scientific standards, not just "out of experience"—and not all relevant "experts" need be knowledgeable about the same domain. Much of Wikforss's argumentation in her book can be seen as a reaction to this rhetorical question: different considerations are brought forward that are meant to show why leaving politically important decisions to experts would be problematic.

The chapter in which Wikforss rather extensively discusses Brennan's views is entitled "Expert rule".[59] It appears correct to assume that she treats Brennan's epistocracy as a special case of expert rule. How does she describe, then, the sort of expertise whose possession Brennan finds necessary for those who can take part in authoritative political decisions? There are at least four features that she ascribes to Brennan's epistocracy as she sees it.

(i) Voters' epistemic defects about simple political questions. Wikforss says that Brennan's central argument against democracy is epistemological: people are hopelessly ignorant about political questions.[60] Here, Wikforss is presumably referring to Brennan's discussion of the ignorance of the American voter regarding such purely empirical relatively simple political questions as which party controls Congress, whether much money is spent on foreign aid, what Cold War was about, and how much of the federal budget is taken up by social security.[61]

(ii) Voters' epistemic defects about more complex political questions. Wikforss goes on to explain that possessing knowledge about questions of the above-mentioned kind would not suffice to render one competent in the sense required by epistocracy: one would still need detailed information about party programs and about the candidates' political experience, as well

[58] Wikforss (2021), p. 157.
[59] Chapter 3 of the book.
[60] *Ibid*., p. 162.
[61] For more examples of this type, see Brennan (2016), pp. 24–28. For the limited relevance of such knowledge, cf. *ibid*., p. 189.

as a capacity to evaluate which political proposals would best fulfill the goals that a given voter has—this capacity being based on social-scientific knowledge.[62] Here, it should be noted—though Wikforss does not stress this separately—that not all of these requirements concern simple empirical facts: the capacity to assess the relationship between what one wants and what candidates propose requires a disposition of rational processing that cannot be acquired by consulting a book five minutes before voting. The main difficulty of acquiring competence is indeed related to developing such a disposition, not to consulting an external source of information in order to get updated about basic facts.

(iii) Commitment to correct answers to political questions. Wikforss maintains that proponents of epistocracy (among other philosophers) assume that political questions have correct answers.[63] She says that Brennan very explicitly accepts this hypothesis. She notes that this hypothesis is highly problematic—because political questions do not merely depend on our factual beliefs regarding the world, but also on what we wish (our values or preferences). Therefore, insofar as Brennan's argumentation really depends on this hypothesis, his position remains problematic and insufficiently defended by Brennan himself. But does Brennan really claim that all political questions have correct answers? The reason why Wikforss claims he does is as follows. Brennan takes up three hypotheses that David Estlund enumerates in his book *Democratic Authority* as principles that proponents of epistocracy typically take as their starting point (*truth tenet*, *knowledge tenet*, *authority tenet*). As Brennan formulates it, the first of these principles—the *truth tenet*—states that there are correct answers to at least some political questions.[64] Now, Estlund—a renowned critic of epistocracy—concentrates on arguing against the third tenet, which is why Brennan likewise focuses on it.[65] Regarding the truth tenet, Brennan does not say anything in particular,

[62] Wikforss (2021), p. 164. Cf. Brennan (2016), pp. 28–30, 189–190.

[63] Wikforss (2021), pp. 169–170.

[64] See Brennan (2016), p. 16, Estlund (2007), p. 30. Estlund's own formulations are in terms of procedure-independent normative standards by which political decisions are to be judged. In Brennan's formulation, the *knowledge tenet* says that some citizens are more reliable at determining political truths than others (i.e., these citizens are better at responding correctly to those political questions that have a correct answer), and the *authority tenet* states that it is justified to grant political authority to citizens who have greater knowledge or reliability, over those with lesser knowledge. Brennan proposes to replace the authority tenet by an *antiauthority tenet*, according to which it is justified to *not permit* incompetent or morally unreasonable people to exercise political authority over others. Cf. Sect. 5.2 below.

[65] Estlund argues, in particular, that even if people agreed on epistocratic competence criteria, these criteria might—as a matter of contingent fact—yield power to persons who, in addition to

but he is indeed clearly prepared to accept it. However, the formulation Brennan cites is much more innocent than the one Wikforss claims he holds: *at least some* political questions have a correct answer—he does not say they all do. Estlund's own wording is even more prudent: there are *procedure-independent normative standards* by which political decisions ought to be judged.

For Estlund, the role of the truth tenet is to help us avoid the extreme view according to which political decisions could only be normatively evaluated with reference to the procedures that produce them: if it is ever meaningful to say that one political decision is "substantially speaking" better than another, something like the truth tenet must be accepted.[66] It should be noted that the procedure-independent standards required by the truth tenet can be fully *objective* without being formulated in purely factual terms (they may refer to citizens' preferences if this is done in a suitable way). Nor does the truth tenet entail that thinking about politics cannot depend on factors *other* than such standards.

Now, there is certainly a sense in which voters' preferences cannot be judged *normatively* at all. Wishing to promote certain interests rather than others is neither correct nor incorrect, and the same goes for desiring the society to be organized in a given way; at least it is perfectly reasonable to hold such a view and much less obviously reasonable to argue for the contrary.[67] On the other hand, objectively valid procedure-independent

being competent, had further characteristics that would undo whatever benefits competence would entail. In such a case, it would so happen that factually, competence is correlated with negative features conceptually unrelated to it. E.g., being racist or sexist could be such "epistemically detrimental features". See Estlund (2003), pp. 62–66. It is an empirical question whether or to what extent such correlations occur, and whether they would be, all things considered, more severe than problems induced by democracy. It should also be noted that similarly in democracies, the majority that determines the outcome of an election may have substantive characteristics negative for the realization of desirable features of policy outcomes, in addition to the formal characteristic of being the largest class all members of which support the same candidate or party (and those representatives to whom the power is conferred by the majority may have negative substantive characteristics in addition to the the formal characteristic of being representatives of the above-mentioned largest class).

[66] Estlund (2007), p. 31.

[67] Claiming otherwise would require admitting moral facts, which would provide a requisite objective standard for such normative judgments (cf. Wikforss (2021), pp. 169–175). While preferences cannot be judged in terms of correctness, they can certainly be incoherent relative to other preferences or relative to what is believed about the objective reality. Thus, it might turn out upon reflection that some preferences should be dismissed due to their incoherence. Still, whatever people prefer or desire or want is not reducible to what they know or believe, or more generally to their cognitive capacities (while preferences clearly depend on beliefs and cognitive capacities). What one wants might have catastrophic consequences or be incoherent, but one's

normative standards can indeed perfectly well be formulated in a vocabulary that makes reference to preferences. Namely, there are objectively valid correlations between desired outcomes and means by which it is rational to believe they can be achieved. For example, standards of the following forms could be objectively valid: if you want X and believe Y, then you ought to vote for candidate Z (for given what you believe and what the candidate offers, there are indeed reasons to think that X will be realized). Or: if you want X and believe Y, then you ought to get better informed before voting in the first place (because actually, if Y is correct, then in fact X cannot be realized).[68]

When Brennan says that some political questions have a correct answer, he does not thereby claim that questions about *arbitrary aspects* of political decisions have a correct answer. He is just committed to there being some aspects of political decisions that can be judged by objective standards. By framing Brennan as someone who claims that political questions universally have a right or wrong answer, Wikforss makes it undeservedly easy for herself to be seemingly in a position to refute Brennan's view. She remarks that one could literally adopt such a view by postulating *moral knowledge* as a separate variety of knowledge.[69] Here, Wikforss is thinking of conditions for precisely being in a position to know what preferences a voter should have—and one could not possibly know such a thing unless there were *moral facts* about which one could have *moral knowledge*. It would, however, seem to go rather strongly against Brennan's philosophical outlook to postulate such an empirically elusive variety of facts with their corresponding variety of knowledge, which is why such a position should not be ascribed to Brennan unless this becomes interpretively inevitable. For the purposes of the present paper, we need not adopt a definite position regarding moral realism. In particular, Brennan's critique of democracy does not presuppose there being moral facts, and nor does Wikforss's defense.

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psychological state is not disqualified as desire for this reason. The interplay of desires and rational processing is crucial for decision-making, but the decision-making process needs a non-cognitive input and that is what preferences provide.

[68] The general point is this: there can be objective facts about phenomena that themselves are not objective. Preferences are arbitrary products of the human will (preferences themselves are not correct or incorrect), but there can nevertheless be correct or incorrect affirmations about them. In particular, there can be objective facts about the relationship between a voter's outcome preferences and his or her preferred methods for attaining them. Thus, there is nothing incoherent in the idea that objective normative standards in Estlund's sense could be about preferences.

[69] Wikforss (2021), p. 170. This would mean adopting moral realism: moral knowledge would pertain to moral facts, and if one accepts such a variety of facts, one is a moral realist.

(iv) Existence of moral expertise. Directly related to her discussion of the truth tenet, Wikforss says that Brennan's argument for epistocracy requires not only the existence of scientific expertise, but even the existence of *moral expertise* in the sense of expertise regarding how the society should be developed. And she accuses Brennan of holding that some people are "moral experts".[70] Does Brennan really postulate expertise of such kind and if so, in what sense? Brennan refers to empirical studies according to which well-informed and badly informed citizens have systematically different (policy) preferences.[71] In the section in which Brennan first mentions theses studies, he does not refer to preferences of better-informed people as "more enlightened", although when describing those results in more detail, he indeed uses this term.[72] Wikforss reads Brennan as suggesting that some preferences are in themselves more enlightened than others, and as furthermore observing that there is a correlation between preferences and knowledge—thereby suggesting that according to Brennan, some citizens are more skillful in spotting such enlightened preferences.[73] In reality, what Brennan says is fully compatible with "enlightened preference" meaning "preference of a well-informed voter" (and similarly for the comparative uses of the expression), in which case such preferences are not claimed to be in themselves "enlightened", merely claimed to be held by informed people.[74] Thus, when suggesting that according to Brennan certain preferences are intrinsically "enlightened", Wikforss takes a further step in depicting Brennan's position as indefensible.

What is more, Wikforss correctly notes that any correlations between one's preferences and one's state of informedness do not by themselves force us to postulate any faculty of *moral* knowledge: there could be such correlations between preferences and knowledge of plain matters of fact. But she finds even in this observation a ground for criticizing Brennan's argumentation, since she is already convinced that Brennan is committed to

[70] *Ibid.*, pp. 170, 174.

[71] Brennan (2016), pp. 33–34. Brennan refers notably to studies conducted by the political scientists Scott Althaus (2003) and Martin Gilens (2012). Wikforss does not expressly note that Brennan speaks here of *policy* preferences, which by their nature indeed require a cognitive process for their formulation.

[72] See Brennan (2016), pp. 188–190, 198. Cf. also the index of his book (p. 282), where Brennan indicates even the pages 33 and 34 as concerning "enlightened preferences".

[73] Wikforss (2021), p. 170.

[74] Brennan (2016, p. 190) describes Althaus's work by speaking of the (possible) "correctness" of enlightened preferences—a manner of speaking which is at the face of it disturbing: how could preferences be correct? Here, however, we should recall that Althaus is speaking of *policy* preferences, and relative to given *outcome* preferences, one's policy preferences can indeed be objectively incorrect (the policies not being likely to yield the outcome).

moral truths and *moral knowledge*, in which case the examples provided by Brennan in the form of correlations between preferences and empirical facts would be insufficient: examples pertaining to moral truths and moral knowledge would still be needed.

4.3. The role of knowledge according to Wikforss

While Wikforss rejects epistocracy, she does stress the importance of knowledge for democracy. She refers approvingly to Robert Dahl's and Henrik Oscarsson's views on the relationship between knowledge and democracy.[75] According to the former, the crux of democracy is that it renders it more likely for the citizens to get what they want, provided that they have knowledge of different kinds.[76] The latter argues that voters have two main tasks: to *demand accountability* of their existing representatives for conducted policies, and to *confer a mandate* to future representatives.[77] And Oscarsson maintains that both tasks require knowledge and capacity to process political information. Oscarsson's examples of the requisite knowledge are of essentially the same kind as the examples Brennan gives, and it is important that he adds information processing as a separate requisite cognitive skill. Thus, at least the cognitive requirements according to Oscarsson are of the same *types* as components of competence according Brennan. Wikforss appears to understand information processing in a rather narrow sense, though. She takes it to consist merely of a capacity to update our beliefs (and even preferences) on the basis of the information we acquire for example via media or discussion with others.[78] Brennan's competence requirement involves a much more demanding capacity of being able to evaluate the realizability of desired outcomes, and to assess the relationship between the desired outcomes and means proposed for attaining them.

Wikforss says explicitly that citizens' possibility to vote away the politicians they do not like has no value, unless the citizens have knowledge of what the politicians have done or intend to do. Similarly, Brennan anticipates that someone might suggest that voters need not be experts in politics, as they merely "need to know enough to throw the incumbent bastards out when the bastards are doing a bad job". But, notes Brennan, "knowing whether the bastards are doing a bad job requires a tremendous

[75] Wikforss (2021), p. 44.
[76] Dahl (1989), pp. 111–112.
[77] Oscarsson (2006), pp. 27–29. Regarding the *mandate–sanction model*, Oscarsson refers *inter alia* to Esaiasson & Holmberg (1996).
[78] Wikforss (2021), p. 46.

amount of social scientific knowledge".[79] The political scientists Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels argue in detail that "retrospective voting" is a highly problematic tool in the hands of the real-world largely ignorant electorate.[80] Those in office are rewarded or punished for the performance of economy based on the last six months before the election, while the incumbents cannot have control over such short-term economic tendencies. At the same time the longer-term performance of economy, over which their policies can have an effect, is ignored. Incumbents can likewise be punished for shark attacks or natural catastrophes—events beyond their control—while events over which they have a genuine influence are neglected.[81]

When criticizing epistocracy, Wikforss opts for downplaying the above-mentioned knowledge requirement she herself advocates in an earlier part of her book, saying now that it is a great advantage of democracy that when things go wrong in the sense that the voters are not content with the results, it is possible to vote away those who have the power.[82] However, by Wikforss's own standards, if voters lack knowledge required to judge the reasons for their dissatisfaction (as they may according to Wikforss, without compromising their right to vote), such a possibility has rationally speaking no value.

It is at first sight somewhat curious that Wikforss happily displays voters' knowledge and capacity of rational information processing as crucial conditions of a well-functioning democracy, and furthermore admits that these conditions are by no means automatically fulfilled, but still she has no slightest inclination to draw Brennan's conclusion—that empirically, democracy is doomed to failure as an instrument of political decision-making. How can that be? She follows Oscarsson in resorting to what we could call the "strategy of portraying citizens as victims".

Oscarsson stresses the fact that in order to understand the voters' behavior and attitudes, due attention must be paid to their circumstances; the voters, he says, cannot be expected to act in any other way than in accordance with the prevailing institutional and political conditions.[83] He sums up this observation by saying that every political system gets the voters it "deserves". In Chapter 5 of her book, Wikforss interprets these remarks by Oscarsson by affirming that no epistemic defects that the voters may have can be blamed on the voters, but must be blamed on the prevailing

[79] Wikforss (2021), p. 45, Brennan (2016), pp. 29–30.
[80] See Achen and Bartels (2016), esp. Chap. 4 (pp. 90–115).
[81] Cf. *ibid.*, Chap. 5 (pp. 116–145).
[82] Wikforss (2021), p. 177.
[83] Oscarsson (2013).

institutional and political conditions.[84] This would mean ruling out at the outset the possibility that citizens could be held at least partly responsible for the knowledge-related shortcomings that they might have. Wikforss does not merely see the citizens as victims of circumstances insofar as their epistemic defects are concerned, but views the society as a meta-level actor who has forced those defects upon the citizens by not having taken care to modify the circumstances suitably (and this despite the fact that the society is by hypothesis democratically run).[85]

In Chapter 1 of her book, Wikforss is slightly less categorical: knowledge about politics that allows the citizen to use political power does not only depend on the citizen's individual capacity, but also on how the society is organized—e.g., whether citizens have equal opportunities to good education and access to reliable sources of information.[86] The circumstances of some people are certainly more favorable for knowledge-acquisition than those of others; whether each and every citizen could be rendered competent in Brennan's sense by educational interventions of the state may be dubious, but these problems need not directly concern us here.[87] For, suppose Brennan is right in maintaining that *if* voters have the features discussed in Section 3.1, *then* democracy is not a good tool for making political decisions. Suppose Brennan is also right in holding that the antecedent of this conditional is true: the voters have the relevant epistemic defects. What Wikforss's conviction adds to this is the claim that the society is to blame for these epistemic defects. Perhaps—but no matter who is to blame, the defects are there, and if the mere existence of the defects suffices for concluding that democracy is not a good tool, then, as a matter of fact, it is not a good tool. Democracy is not rendered any better tool by the fact that the problems have this or that source. In reality, Wikforss is suggesting that in certain sorts of idealized circumstances democracy would work better than it does. But Brennan expressly wished to confine attention to empirically verifiable circumstances,

[84] Wikforss (2021), pp. 288–289.

[85] If the society is democratic (as Wikforss certainly assumes here), then citizens have presumably supported decisions as a consequence of which the knowledge distribution is as it is. One more reason, then, to think democracy leads to bad outcomes! Actually, what Wikforss says could be employed as an argument against the real-life exemplifications of democracy—she is in effect saying that in order for democracy to function, the relation of the state vis-à-vis the citizens should be different from what it in fact is.

[86] Wikforss (2021), pp. 47–48.

[87] As most of us have probably witnessed in school, many people are just not interested in learning, certainly not learning anything a bit more theoretical lacking immediate applications. Assuming that all people can overcome such tendencies appears to be a wild idealization—a person's very personality is partly determined by his or her attitude towards theoretical considerations.

not to ideal circumstances. So Wikforss's observations are in this respect strictly speaking beside the point as a critique against Brennan.

This said, having admitted that the citizens have epistemic defects with negative effects on the collective decision-making process, it is natural to ask whether and how this situation could be improved. Insofar as the attention is confined to epistemic issues, there are basically three options: (1) the set of voters is restricted according to a competence criterion, (2) the set of voters is kept intact but attempts are made to improve the competence of the citizens, and (3) things are left as they are and we live with the consequences.

Brennan of course advocates experimenting with option (1). Here, the stricter the competence criterion is, the fewer are the citizens meeting it. In the extreme case the set of relevantly competent citizens might be empty. In practice, the most important thing would be to exclude the votes that are expressions of internally incoherent positions—notably those that simultaneously correspond to certain outcome preferences *and* to policy preferences that cannot lead to the desired outcomes.[88] Brennan notes that it might actually be possible to formulate *democratically* a legal definition of political competence.[89] For, he points out that citizens may well be competent to decide what is required of competent political decision-making without themselves being competent to make political decisions. Among the prerequisites that a citizen might mention, there could be good grasp of economic policy and foreign policy. But, as the citizen might be the first to admit, his or her capacity to pinpoint these as criteria of competence by no means entails that the citizen is personally an expert in economic and foreign policy. Generally, one's capacity to formulate a criterion does not entail one's capacity to apply the criterion. In order to vote competently, the citizen should (by his or her own standards) be able to know which candidates master well economic policy and foreign policy, but to do that, the voter should, essentially, personally master these topics.

Despite the possibility of this kind of democratic implementation of epistocracy, Brennan is well aware of many practical reasons why it might be impossible to put epistocracy into practice. In particular, he notes that people might be stubborn to the point that even if it was proven beyond doubt that epistocracy produces more substantive justice than democracy does, they would still regard epistocracy as being unjust.[90] In that case people would be prepared to revolt to keep the distribution of voting rights intact (i.e., equally distributed over all citizens), even if by so doing they would guarantee that

[88] Cf. Brennan (2016), p. 209.
[89] *Ibid.*, pp. 224–226.
[90] *Ibid*., p. 124.

the society remains substantively less just than it could be. Under such conditions, epistocracy would be less stable than democracy as a form of government.

Wikforss opts for alternative (2). She says that there is a better solution to political ignorance than abolishing democracy: counteracting ignorance through actors such as schools, adult education, libraries, researchers popularizing their results, investigative journalism, and news media.[91] Brennan points out that proponents of democracy stress the importance of education partly because they maintain that such education is needed to make citizens prepared to participate in politics.[92] Thus, proponents of democracy like Wikforss are actually committed to the view that at any given moment, some citizens are politically more competent than others—else the assumed need for the above-mentioned types of educational actions would be lost. Could, then, the possible benefits of epistocracy be attained within democracy by improving the knowledge-acquisition and reasoning capacities of the citizens? Wikforss leaves out of considerations many of the psychological features that according to Brennan explain voter behavior and that would impede both acquiring such skills and using them if acquired. Even if citizens were epistemically better prepared, the fact remains that in support of democratic voting decisions, they would have no incentive to seek any even slightly more demanding information or carry out more than absolutely trivial reasonings. After all, their chances of literally affecting the outcome would be next to nil.[93]

Wikforss also thinks that political participation can contribute to increase the citizens' knowledge of politics and sees political participation therefore as a means for improving democratic decision-making. Here Wikforss chooses not to comment Brennan, who has a very different analysis of the prospects of political participation. Brennan speaks of the "education argument" according to which people's engagement in civic and political activity would tend to improve their virtue and make them better informed.[94] He stresses that this is an empirical claim and therefore depends on how people as a matter of fact are. He says that to defend this argument, one must "provide strong empirical evidence that when citizens participate more, they tend to take a broad view of others' interests, search for ways to promote the common

[91] Wikforss (2021), pp. 179–180.
[92] Brennan (2016), p. 262, footnote 19.
[93] In epistocracy, the chances would be higher, since the number of voters would be smaller, and possibly the personality of the relevantly competent voters would be such that their intellectual curiosity would induce them to apply such cognitive operations even though the strict payoff for the election outcome would be small indeed.
[94] Brennan (2016), pp. 54–55.

good, engage in long-term thinking, and grapple with moral, philosophical, and scientific issues".[95] Brennan himself interprets the empirical literature on political participation and deliberative democracy as supporting the conclusion that political participation and deliberation rather tend to have a corrupting effect on our moral and epistemic character, to make worse our biases, and to lead to a greater conflict.[96] We cannot take up in this article a systematic discussion of the benefits and shortcomings of deliberative democracy for citizens' epistemic capacities. Here we content ourselves in noting, on the one hand, that the mere acknowledgment that education would be useful for democracy means admitting that citizens may lack competence needed for democratic decision-making and, on the other hand, that it is a complex empirical question to assess what can be done to improve people's political knowledge—and to determine in what ways, if any, the sort of knowledge that can be transmitted via state interventions would be useful to improve democracy as a method of political decision-making.

It may still be noted that Wikforss's understanding of the need for competence appears to be more "individualistic" than is justified by the phenomenon being discussed. Namely, she says that for the well-informed citizen, democracy works as it should, but she affirms that the less one knows, the higher is the risk that one does not take part at all in democratic decision-making or that one does so in an ineffective way.[97] This comment seems to betray a thinking error. Whether democracy functions or not is a collective matter—its success precisely depends on what each voter does.[98] If many voters are incompetent, then democracy does *not* work, period. In particular, it does not work "for" the well-informed. This is precisely because the uninformed votes count, as well. The collective decision is determined by all votes taken together—informed citizens do not get any special benefit from a badly made collective decision just because they were informed and were part of the total electorate. The collective decision determined by the

[95] *Ibid*., p. 56.
[96] *Ibid*., pp. 56–73, see esp. pp. 67, 74.
[97] Wikforss (2021), p. 48.
[98] The degree of success of a democratic decision is to be measured in terms of the consequences of the collective decision produced. The problem is what should be assumed regarding the epistemic status of the individual voters in order to optimize the consequences of the collective decision—optimize from the perspective of common good or other desirable features of policy outcomes. The individual gain for an individual voter is virtually nil anyway—whether the voter is competent or not. Surely, individual competent voters can cast an informed vote, but whatever their goals may be, their competence does not make "democracy function for them" independently of the votes of all other voters.

individual votes is the same for all. The question is how to optimize its content.

Alternative (3)—reacting to citizens' epistemic defects by doing nothing—can be tempting for various reasons. One might estimate that we ought to take as our starting point Robert Dahl's "principle of political equality", described by Wikforss as the principle that all citizens are to be treated as equally qualified to participate in the political decision-making process.[99] If *being qualified to participate* is a substantial requirement that has something to do with competence, then either this principle, in this formulation, states that people must be treated as being something they are not (if competence criteria are demanding) or else the criteria are so weak that one cannot fail to meet them—in which case it would make more sense to express the principle simply by saying that citizens ought to be given equal opportunity to participate in the political decision-making process. Citizens are not *treated as* having a qualification, but they simply *have* the qualification—the qualification consisting of nothing more than their individual existence as citizens. The motivations for the principle of political equality are not so much related to the citizens' epistemic capacities, but to their interests and desires as members of the society. We return to this conative aspect of political decision-making in Section 5.

A further motive for preferring option (3) could be that for practical reasons, it may be impossible to implement any form of epistocracy (as noted, citizens might revolt against such attempts even if epistocracy were provably a key to a more just society). And attempts to increase citizens' level of knowledge and their capacity of reasoning might still fall short of making the citizens meet Brennan's competence criterion. Then again, it might happen that the advantages of democracy do not, after all, depend essentially on voters' epistemic capacities. David Runciman, for example, suggests that democratic action is fueled by short-term considerations (politicians' impatient reactions to various types of stimuli), while the advantages of democracy stem from its long-term workings that are not consciously planned by anyone (notably the capacity to muddle through crises).[100] In any event, as long as the citizens in a democracy believe (correctly or not) that they can influence political decisions (by voting, by debating, or by any other legally available means they find relevant), the democratic form of government contributes to maintaining social peace. The energy that citizens might otherwise direct to revolting is now used for democracy-internal activities. The further from the truth the mentioned belief

[99] Wikforss (2021), p. 292.
[100] Runciman (2013). For an elaboration of these ideas, see Runciman (2018a).

is, the more the politically active citizens will get frustrated. And the more the society has encouraged the citizens to participate in politics, letting them believe that their personal judgment on political matters is unconditionally valuable, the greater the shock when the fruitlessness of attempts to influence gets revealed. Signs of a shock of this kind could be seen for example in connection with the Yellow Vests movement in France in 2018 and 2019.[101] In sum: letting things be as they are—i.e., choosing option (3)—is not unproblematic, either.

5. Preferences and political decision-making

As noted in Section 4.2, Wikforss emphasizes that political questions do not merely depend on our factual beliefs regarding the world, but also on what we wish. She stresses that when people vote, what is at stake is what they *want*, not how the world is.[102] That is, in this case—as in any sort of decision-making—people's *preferences* (their *aims*, *wishes*, and *interests*) play a crucial role. Preferences are the driving-force of decision-making. This is certainly correct. Indeed, no amount of non-psychological information about the world suffices for deducing what individual citizens wish, and insofar as it is judged desirable that the citizens' preferences are taken into account in political decision-making, it surely seems that the political system must be so set up that citizens themselves have a chance to express their preferences.

Wikforss takes the distinctions fact/value judgment [*värdering*] and means/aim to create a major problem for epistocracy.[103] She grants that decision-making requires knowledge about (non-psychological) matters of fact, as well as capacity to find means for attaining given objectives. That is, she recognizes the cognitive aspect of decision-making. But she considers that the epistocrat makes an important mistake by being exclusively fixed on this aspect. Wikforss stresses that we must likewise take into account the

[101] Among the *Gilets jaunes*, the sense of worsening of one's living conditions due to political decisions was combined with the sense of incapacity to influence such decisions and with the sense that one's expressed demands should be more or less directly transformed into a solution to the experienced problems, implemented by the state. The reason why uprisings of this kind cannot have a smooth solution is that they involve mutually contradictory assumptions: one retains from the workings of democracy the idea that wished-for outcomes are expressed by single citizens, but views the state as an independent realizer of wishes (instead of an expression of what citizens themselves have wanted). The realizability of the demands is not reflected upon, and the state is taken to ignore the demands unless they are realized as such. The rationally unfounded presupposition is that the state has the means to realize the demands of the insurrectionary citizens and that the realizability of those demands could not be in conflict with what other citizens may demand with equal right.

[102] Wikforss (2021), p. 153.

[103] *Ibid.*, p. 175.

citizens' preferences—indeed, the political objectives citizens would wish to attain. In short, she points out that the conative aspect of decision-making cannot be ignored and criticizes epistocrats for ignoring it.

5.1. The question of dividing labor: preferences vs. implementation

It is certainly correct that there can be no decision-making without preferences. Thus, insofar as epistocracy fails to take the *conative* aspect of political decision-making properly into account, this is indeed its major weakness. Then again, if democracy suffers from the defects identified by Brennan, democracy has a crucial problem with the *cognitive* aspect of decision-making, whence the problems detected in epistocracy do not automatically yield credibility to democracy as a method of political decision-making. It is a genuine possibility that *both* forms of government—epistocracy and democracy—have serious flaws. Wikforss, for her part, thinks that the division of labor between the two aspects is easily handled: citizens express their preferences, while MPs together with experts of different domains take care of finding the means necessary to attain the relevant objectives.[104] For this view she refers to Thomas Christiano's discussion in his book *The Constitution of Equality* (2008). Christiano believes that citizens are typically competent to choose the aims the society is to pursue, whereupon the legislators can be charged with implementing and devising the means to attain those aims. Accordingly, Christiano proposes a variant of democracy in which the political labor is neatly divided between the citizens and the MPs.[105] However, Christiano himself recognizes that this idea has two major problems.

First, there is the problem of ensuring that those in charge for selecting the means actually attempt to realize the aims fixed by citizens. Second, it should be possible to design institutions so that the division of labor is respected without compromising the equality among citizens.[106] Christiano admits that citizens fail to satisfy any even moderate standards for beliefs about *how best to achieve* their political aims. This would, says Christiano, require an immense amount of knowledge of social science and of particular facts—knowledge that citizens lack. Then again, without such knowledge, citizens cannot judge whether legislators are seriously attempting to realize

[104] *Ibid*.

[105] See Christiano (2006), Sect. 3.3; Christiano (2008), Chap. 3.

[106] For that matter, a third immediate problem is that in this setting (unlike in epistocracy or in standard representative democracy), no filter is imposed on the preferences of the citizens: the legislators have the obligation of attempting to realize whatever (the majority of) the citizens happen to wish. No room is left for modifying the desired outcomes on the basis of a reflection on their consequences.

the aims the citizens have set.[107] The problems of retrospective voting referred to in Section 4.3 would be likely to recur, and in any event the citizens would lack appropriate means to control whether the legislators are acting as they should. It is likely that legislators would get punished or praised for wrong reasons. Brennan remarks, discussing Christiano's proposal, that this problem appears already at the level of electing the legislators. Namely, as noted in Section 3.1, when voting, the citizens cannot help selecting a combination of outcome preferences and policy preferences—since the candidates stand for both sorts of preferences. Hence already the act of voting requires competence and is not in practice a simple expression of outcome preferences.[108] On the part of the legislators, Christiano's proposal would require that they subordinate all their activities to attempting to satisfy the aims of the citizens, and it is far from evident that that would be practically doable to the extent required.

There is even a further problem related to the requirement that citizens choose the aims the society is to pursue. The strength of the idea stems from the fact that in this way the preferences of the citizens become a part of the input of the political process. The way in which people experience their lives can thereby affect political decisions, this being something that Wikforss among others takes to be a crucial part of democracy.[109] However, the defects that Brennan has identified in democratic decision-making in general will be operative here, too. A single citizen will not have the requisite incentive to put much effort in his or her particular expression of preference.[110] And even more importantly, seriously formulated aims precisely *must* take into account questions of realizability—they must be based on a reflection on means, and they had also better have some sort of generalizability so that their realization might be good for the society as a whole, not just for this or that citizen. How could citizens' desired aims confer an obligation on the legislators to realize those aims, unless those aims themselves have at least undergone a coherence check with respect to resources potentially available to the state? But if even Christiano himself admits that citizens are not generally in a position to carry out such reflection, it is in the end wishful thinking that citizens' experiences, and the preferences these experiences create, would give rise to formulations of ends that the society ought to aim at. They give rise to something much more fragmented and tentative which requires a whole lot of processing

[107] Cf. Christiano (2006), Sect. 3.3.
[108] See Brennan (2016), pp. 209–210.
[109] Wikforss (2021), pp. 139, 178.
[110] As Brennan (2016, p. 210) puts it, cognitive biases and lack of incentive to think rationally about politics applies just as well to normative issues as they do to empirical matters.

before anything like a full-fledged society-level aims could be fixed. The expressed preferences themselves are not complete, just awaiting to be realized via a selection of suitable means. And neither of the two parties of the division of labor—citizens, legislators—is well suited to carry out such processing, either due to the lack of competence or due to the lack of verified legitimacy.

5.2. Preferences and epistocracy

In Brennan's sense, a political system is epistocratic if as a matter of law or policy, it distributes political power in proportion to knowledge or competence.[111] Characteristic to epistocracy in Brennan's sense is the requirement of competence, which is expressly a method-related requirement. We have stressed that competence qualifies the *way* in which a decision is to be made. Brennan's *competence principle* states that if a high-stakes political decision is made incompetently or in bad faith, or by a generally incompetent decision-making body, then the decision is presumed to be unjust, illegitimate, and lacking in authority. In other words: any agent exercising political power over anyone else has the obligation to use that power in good faith, and has the obligation to use that power competently.[112] Thus phrased, the principle has a cognitive and a moral component. In particular, it concerns the cognitive aspect of decision-making—the epistemic character of those who take part in decision-making. But how do we ever get to apply such a decision-making method unless we find somewhere the preferences needed as the input of this method? This appears to create a major problem for epistocracy. As noted in Section 4.2, Brennan hardly intends competence to yield any sort of "moral knowledge" allowing the competent citizens to detect worthwhile political goals—preferences citizens "should" have. Rather, those who vote express by their votes preferences that are not reducible to knowledge.

If the only preferences that get taken into account in the political decision-making process are the preferences of those citizens who meet the competence criterion, there seems to be an almost inevitable risk that citizens' concerns and interests are *not* treated equitably. What guarantees are there that an epistocracy would be responsive to the preferences or interests of those who have no right to vote? Brennan admits that one of the major objections to epistocracy is the fact that political knowledge is spread unevenly among demographic groups, which means that by epistocratic

[111] Brennan (2016), p. 208.
[112] *Ibid.*, p. 21; see also pp. 151–155; Illing (2018).

criteria, the right to vote is unevenly distributed among those groups, too.[113] According to his diagnosis, some groups are more knowledgeable than others because of underlying injustices and social problems. Brennan maintains that this is not a reason to allow everyone to vote. Instead, it is a reason to fix the underlying injustices. This will, then, allow more people to vote, because thereby more people will meet the competence criterion. According to Brennan, the question is whether the injustices can be fixed better in a democracy or in an epistocracy.[114]

As noted above, Wikforss argues that it is an essential part of democracy that people's experiences can affect political decisions. Now, if in an epistocracy the competence criterion excludes certain demographic groups as voters, there may be certain experiences (say, experiences of poverty or oppression) that people entitled to vote lack. But if the competent population segment lacks the requisite first-hand experiences, this may reasonably be assumed to entail that they will not take action to remove the corresponding injustices. Wikforss takes it that consequently, democracy is needed to allow experiences of those in vulnerable positions to affect collective decisions.[115]

Wikforss estimates that she can here turn Brennan's argumentation against Brennan's own goals. Namely, Brennan's so-called *antiauthority tenet* states that incompetent or morally unreasonable citizens ought to be forbidden from holding power, or their power ought to be reduced, in order to protect innocent people from their incompetence.[116] Wikforss views the lack of certain first-hand experiences as lack of *knowledge* or *competence* of a kind, whence—she claims—it follows from Brennan's tenet that innocent people must be protected from those who lack these first-hand experiences.[117] This would be a *reductio ad absurdum* of Brennan's position, since presumably it would not be possible to have all relevant first-hand experiences represented by citizens meeting Brennan's cognitively demanding competence criteria. The problem to which Wikforss refers is more thoroughly discussed by María Pía Méndez under the heading *Information Gap Problem*. Méndez takes the problem to be that there would be a specific type of information that a restricted epistocratic electorate would lack, namely laypeople's preferences regarding the "form" of the means that are required to foster given preferences (including "general preferences" aiming at common good). By "form" of a means to achieve an objective

[113] Brennan (2016), p. 33.
[114] *Ibid.*, p. 228.
[115] Wikforss (2021), pp. 139, 178–179.
[116] Brennan (2016), pp. 17, 142, 230. Cf. footnote 64.
[117] Wikforss (2021), p. 179.

("form" of a policy), she intends the specific way in which a policy is implemented.[118] Méndez maintains that since the epistocratic electorate lacks this sort of information, epistocracy does not live up to its own standards and is in particular unsuited to address the Preferences/Means Discrepancy.[119]

Wikforss and Méndez point to an important problem: arguably Brennan does not give enough attention to the question of whether it is possible to properly incorporate citizens' preferences in an epistemic framework and if so, how. This said, there is nothing in these observations that makes democracy triumph as a method of political decision-making. If democracy is as bad a tool as Brennan says it is for yielding goals that citizens themselves judge valuable, then having the relevant first-hand experiences taken into account in the input of the democratic process is a cold comfort indeed. That is, given the defects of democracy identified by Brennan, it is not evident that just because in democracies everyone has the right to vote and thereby express his or her preferences, the democratic process will counteract injustices and social problems. The citizens' experiences will become a part of the decision-making process via votes they cast. If citizens are ignorant, irrational, misinformed and incompetent when casting votes and thereby implicitly fixing the policy preferences that correspond to the desired outcome of removing injustices and social problems, it is unlikely that their preferred outcome will be attained. And here the primary culprit is the democratic decision-making method itself. Then again, also epistocratic agents need incentives for their actions and have their own interests. It is by no means clear that the competence that these agents by hypothesis have induces a suitable disinterestedness required for seriously working to remove injustices and social problems. Here, too, a pragmatic attitude could be adopted: we should experiment with epistocracy to be able to compare the results it produces with those produced by democracy. Since democracy and epistocracy both have potentially serious problems due to how people as a matter of fact are, neither option can be declared the best on purely conceptual grounds.

5.3. Putting epistocracy into practice

Brennan discusses different ways in which he thinks epistocracy could be implemented.[120] Among them there are *universal suffrage with epistocratic veto* and *government simulated by an oracle*. In both cases, the preferences of

[118] For the distinction content/form, see Méndez (2021), p. 157.
[119] For the Preferences/Means Discrepancy, see Sect. 3.1 above. For the Information Gap Problem, see Méndez (2021), pp. 161–163.
[120] See Brennan (2016), pp. 208–222.

all adult citizens would be taken into account, but the decision-making mechanism would be devised so as to counteract the negative effects of incompetent voting. Thus, these particular realizations of the idea of epistocracy would go some way towards meeting the concerns expressed by Wikforss and Méndez.

Universal suffrage with epistocratic veto intends to diminish the effects of incompetent voting by means of an *epistocratic council*, which has no right to make law, but instead has power to unmake law. Any political decision of the general electorate or its representatives can be vetoed by the council, provided that the council judges the decisions to be malicious, incompetent or unreasonable. Government simulated by an oracle, again, is based on estimating what the electorate would prefer if only it were well-informed. We can think of the decision-making procedure as simulating an oracle. First, each citizen tells what he or she wants (preferences) and who he or she is (anonymously coded demographic information). Here, Brennan would allow even children to vote. Then the citizens take a quiz of very basic objective political knowledge. With all this information taken as input, it is possible to calculate how each citizen would have voted in the counterfactual situation in which he or she indeed had all relevant information. The actual political decision is made on the basis of these counterfactual votes.[121] Kristoffer Ahlström-Vij develops in much more detail the idea of a political decision-making method that takes as input the political preferences expressed by universal suffrage and that then filters them through a statistical model simulating what the citizens' political preferences *would have been*, had the citizens been well-informed on politically relevant matters. He speaks of *modelled democracy* to refer to the form of government based on using such a simulation—and argues that actually it is a form of democracy, not a form of epistocracy.[122]

It was seen above that the view of democracy defended by Christiano and Wikforss is even doubly problematic due to the Preferences/Means Discrepancy. First, there is the problem of legitimacy that seems difficult to solve: in order to justify the requisite division of labor between citizens and legislators (the former fixing objectives, the latter searching for means to realize them), the citizens should have precisely the sort of competence the lack of which on their part is the main rationale for outsourcing the choice of policies to the legislators. The citizens cannot judge whether the legislators are indeed seriously attempting to realize their objectives unless they can

[121] For epistocratic veto, see Brennan (2016), pp. 215–218, for the simulated oracle, see *ibid*., pp. 220–222 and Illing (2018).
[122] See Ahlström-Vij (2022).

evaluate the quality of different alternative policies as means for attaining these objectives. Second, even if citizens accepted the division of labor without doubting its legitimacy, the very mechanism of electing the legislators among candidates would require competence that most citizens by hypothesis do not have, since the candidates deputize simultaneously for outcomes and policies, while in general the citizens lack competence to judge whether the two are suitably related. Could these sorts of problems be avoided by resorting to one or both of the above-mentioned variants of epistocracy—the one based on an epistemic council and the one simulating counterfactual behavior?

Consider universal suffrage with epistocratic veto. Here the second problem may appear but its effects can be reduced: citizens' votes may stand for problematic combinations of outcome preferences and policy preferences, but the epistemic council can block any laws proposed by unreasonable legislators. Then again, since the majority of legislators need not be competent, it could happen that the epistemic council cannot let *any* proposed laws pass, which would certainly become problematic in the long run. A variant of the first problem would be even more pressing. Namely, even if citizens had themselves democratically voted for criteria of competence (as Brennan suggests they could, cf. Section 4.3), the question of legitimacy of the epistemic council could be raised: to decide whether members of the epistemic council indeed meet the competence criteria, the citizens should themselves be competent, which would not generally be the case. Therefore the citizens could never be sure whether the council has been adequately formed.

What about the idea of simulating informed votes? Here, the legitimacy doubts might concern the specific way of implementing the simulation. The particular way of calculating the counterfactual informed preferences might not be transparent to the people at large, and even if it was, citizens could not really check whether the only factors affecting the outcome of the calculation are those announced to be taken into account. Doubts such as those raised by Runciman regarding algorithms used for implementing epistocracy (mentioned in Section 4.1) might seem difficult to avoid here. Besides, even if there were no interfering factors and the mode of calculation was fully transparent, major problems might ensue. The higher the percentage of incompetent citizens, the more likely would be insurrection. Just imagine a case where 80 percent of the electors vote for a candidate promising to double everyone's income, but the simulation (which takes into account available resources) gives all votes to a candidate that no one had voted and

who promises to cut everyone's income by half. Few citizens would happily accept that the result articulates their *true will*.[123]

Discussing his idea of modelled democracy, Ahlström-Vij nevertheless argues that regarding legitimacy, modelled democracy does not fare worse than any other political system. That is, if the simulations producing the counterfactual votes according to modelled democracy can be reasonably suspected to involve an "unknown bias" due to factors not explicitly taken into account in the specification of the employed statistical model (which would call into question the legitimacy of the simulation), then the same or similar suspicions apply to absolutely any political system.[124] According to Ahlström-Vij, then, simulating counterfactual votes is not more vulnerable to legitimacy doubts than any other manner of channelling voting behavior into collective decisions. This may rationally speaking be a correct observation, but for psychological reasons, voters might still be less charitable with modelled democracy than with standard representative democracy, simply because in the latter case people *feel* they have more control over their representatives—never mind that a given individual's vote has virtually no chances of affecting the fate of the representatives and that all votes taken together may punish the representatives for shark attacks and praise them for economic growth entirely unrelated to their actions. As Runciman notes, the most fundamental difficulty in moving from democracy to any form of epistocracy is psychological, more specifically the cognitive bias known as loss aversion. We do not like to give up what we think belongs to us, even if giving it up could be better for ourselves and for others. Each of us has a possibility of affecting political decisions (indeed, almost infinitesimally small possibility) and the opportunity of attempting to vote away politicians (indeed, often for very bad reasons). We prefer to retain these possibilities rather than giving them away, never mind that giving them away might produce a substantively more just society.[125]

6. Conclusion

Estlund remarks that democracy has always been a vulnerable doctrine. He says that unless it can be convincingly defended, this doctrine is a house of cards and eventually, the winds will come and the cards will fall. To avoid this from happening, says Estlund, democracy had better not be *assumed* to be correct. Not only must proponents of democracy face objections, but

[123] Wikforss (2021, p. 54) speaks of one's "true will" [*den verkliga viljan*] to refer to what one would want if one had all the relevant information.
[124] Ahlström-Vij (2022), Sect. 8.
[125] Runciman (2018b), pp. 175, 187.

actually they themselves should rather anticipate objections than devise apologies for pre-established convictions. Estlund stresses that this is all the more important, as more and more views and actions are defended with the motivation that they are parts or consequences or presuppositions of democracy.[126] People putting forward such defenses for their views or actions do not strictly speaking know what they are doing, unless they understand the objections, and can at least to some extent reply to them. The more one feels sympathy for a view, the more important it is to try detecting problems it involves.

In this article, we have attempted precisely to detect problems in democracy and also in ways of criticizing democracy. We described problems that Brennan identifies in democracy. We saw how Wikforss attempts to undermine Brennan's argumentation and we found her defense problematic at various points. We briefly discussed Brennan's positive proposal—epistocracy—and indicated several related problems. The aim of our article has not been to presuppose the supremacy of a particular form of government and to argue against its real or imagined rivals. We hope to have raised questions to which the reader does not yet have argumentative answers. And we wish that the reader's prevalent sentiment regarding democracy will not be that it is self-evidently the best form of government, but that it involves a plethora of assumptions in need of justification.

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[126] Estlund (2009), p. 241.

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