

Qualified for Power? On Epistemology in Voting

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Received 12 March 2015; accepted 14 April 2015; published 15 April 2015

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Abstract

Equal distribution of suffrage is given a nearly “quasi-religious” status by democrats. However, the right to vote rests on a presumption of capacity, and knowledge and competence therefore are important features of democratic arrangements. Democratic theory often assumes that, in order for (representative) democracy to work properly, the average citizen should be interested in, and pay attention to, politics. In reality, however, only a minority of citizens live up to these standards. This paper examines whether demands of uncontroversial knowledge, that is, knowledge about what it means to vote, can be demanded of voters in order for them to be allowed to vote. It is concluded that, for reasons of justice and “issues of mutual concern”, such demands can be raised regarding such uncontroversial knowledge (but perhaps not for knowledge more controversial in kind).

Keywords

Democracy, Voting, Knowledge, Ignorance, Policies

1. Introduction

In the modern, Western world equal distribution of suffrage is given a nearly “quasi-religious” status by democrats. However, as Frédéric Bastiat argues, the right to vote rests on a presumption of capacity (see for example Caplan, 2007); an expectation that people’s aggregated views are at least better than a coin flip when it comes to the quality of political decisions (see Estlund, 2008: p. 6). This is to say that it is desirable to reach political decisions that are “true”, or at least in line with “the best available knowledge”. An outcome cannot be perceived

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as acceptable *only* because it is produced by democratic procedures,¹ since lack of “epistemic cues” may lead to decisions based on habit and narrow prejudices instead of rationally reflected upon principles (see for example Brennan, 2011a; Caplan, 2007. See also Lau & Redlawsk, 1997). Knowledge and competence therefore are important features of democratic arrangements, and democratic theory often assume that, in order for (representative) democracy to work properly, the average citizen should be interested in, and pay attention to, politics. Such interest and attention, it is assumed, allow for political decisions on behalf of the voters (e.g. a vote) that are rationally considered and that properly reflect voters’ self-interest and the common good (see Lau & Redlawsk, 1997: p. 585). Jason Brennan argues that, since political decisions are imposed upon citizens, they “*must be made by reasonable and competent people in a reasonable and competent way*” (Brennan, 2011b: p. 701). In reality, however, only a minority of citizens live up to these standards (see for example Brennan, 2011a; Caplan, 2007. See also Lau & Redlawsk, 1997)—a great amount of empirical surveys show that citizens often do not know about party differences, what the representatives they vote for stand for, or what they have done or wish to undertake in office (see for example Arnold, 2012: p. 796). Moreover, as I experienced during my work as election supervisor in both the election for the European parliament and the Swedish general election of 2014, many people do not comprehend the voting process *per se*—the most frequently asked question among all ages of voters was: “How do I do this?” Furthermore, there were numerous misconceptions on how many ballots should be cast, and even on the difference between voting for parliamentary politics and voting for municipality politics. I estimated that only about one out of ten knew the proper procedure without having to ask.²

If one believes that an attentive and somewhat knowledgeable public that makes (epistemically) “correct” decisions is necessary for an *optimal* function of representative democracy, then we stand before a democratic dilemma—there seems to be an in-built tension between the value of good-quality political decisions, and the right to vote (in a non-epistemic way). This, in turn, raises questions of sources of reason and which claims to authority ought to be normatively justified. The overarching aim of this paper is to normatively examine whether some practical and theoretical knowledge (i.e., epistemic knowledge) about (i) the voting process and (ii) the political system can be demanded of voters in order to be allowed to vote. In short, should there be some degree of epistemic qualifications for holding political power in the form of casting a vote? This paper will proceed as follows: Section 3, firstly, discusses the value of the right to vote. Section 4 thereafter discusses the epistemic dimensions of voting, and Section 5 lastly, concludes and comments. Before embarking on this quest, however, a discussion on what kind of knowledge this paper deals with is warranted.

2. Uncontroversial Knowledge

The discussion on the role of knowledge in politics is of course not novel; it goes back at least to Plato who, as well known, claimed the philosopher’s right to supreme power in an ideal state (see for example Arendt, 1990: pp. 76-78) and voter knowledge is often a significant part of democratic theory today. However, contemporary debates on political knowledge are either too allowing, almost to the point of “anything goes”, or too demanding, almost to the point of impossible to meet. The too allowing part is here represented by Richard Lau and David Redlawsk, who, in short, define “correct” (knowledgeable) voting as occurring when a voter’s preferences correlate with those of his or her selected candidate (see Lau & Redlawsk, 1997: p. 586. See also Lau, Andersen, & Redlawsk, 2008). This has little to do with knowledge about the voting process and the political system, and, furthermore, a “knowledgeable” decision defined as above can be completely random—it may look as if a voter rationally considered her preferences and those of her selected candidate, while the resulting decision, in fact, depends on “dumb luck”.

The too demanding part, in turn, is here represented by Jason Brennan who argues that we, as voters, have a moral obligation not to vote morally or epistemically “bad” (i.e., “incorrect”). Unlike Lau and Redlawsk, Brennan claims that a voter could, and should, be blamed for “voting the right way, but for the wrong reasons”. According to Brennan, not only the resulting outcome, but also whether the method used to arrive at a decision is reliable has significance (Brennan, 2011a: pp. 68, 79-80. See also Brennan, 2011b; Brennan, 2009). What is needed, Brennan claims, is not being selective in information gathering *per se*, but rather knowing *how* to know.

¹The term “acceptable” may of course raise questions of several kinds (“acceptable to whom”? “Acceptable in what sense?” etc.). These questions will be addressed later on in this paper, but for the time being it suffices to invoke for example the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights as a framework within which an outcome of democratic procedure needs to be “acceptable”.

²To be noted, this is not an observation based on scientific scrutiny and evidence, but with some thousand voters a day for three weeks, at least it is an indication of a general lack of “know-how” regarding the voting procedure and awareness of the political system.

If information is not processed in an open-minded and reliable way, it is of no use. In order to vote “correctly” (or, in Brennan’s word “justified”), a voter has to look for evidence that contradicts her beliefs, and change her mind if the evidence calls for it. She must learn from her mistakes, take disagreement seriously, accept criticism, and regularly scrutinize her cognitive biases (Brennan, 2011a: pp. 179-184. See also Brennan, 2009).

The knowledge I wish to discuss in this paper constitutes a kind of “middle way” between these two theories. It puts somewhat higher demands on the epistemic, but uncontroversial, knowledge of the voting process and the political system than do Lau and Redlawsk, but it puts lower demands on “moral knowledge” than does Brennan. The core of this “middle way” is that what is at stake is knowledge about what it *means* to vote. This does not imply knowledge about exactly which policies will produce which consequences, which ethical view is the best, which the “correct” conception of justice is, and so on, but knowledge to the extent that voters understand *that* voting do have consequences regarding “issues of mutual concern”, and that those consequences may be unjust. This, thus, is not to argue, as does Brennan, that a voter must vote in a justified way; nor does it concern whether she votes “correctly” in the sense of having her preferences correlate with those of her selected candidate. Rather, this paper raises the question of whether it can be demanded of voters to know what it *means* to vote; whether she knows to what she contributes and the possible consequences of her doing so. That is, this paper raises modest questions of uncontroversial knowledge—basic factual knowledge of the voting process and the political system—which makes the “moral cost” of such eventual demands lower than demands for more controversial knowledge, such as what is the best ideology; what ethical view is “correct”, etc. There are, however, still costs even to modest knowledge-demands on voting because of the value intrinsic to the right to vote. This will be discussed further in the following section.

3. The Value of the Right to Vote

3.1. Desiring the Right?

The single vote of an individual is unlikely to determine the outcome of any voting process, and undoubtedly there are other ways of expressing political opinions, ways that may be more direct and more decisive than one ballot among many. Yet people do vote and cherish their right to do so. Why is this, when an individual vote is practically meaningless? It has been said that if the right to vote is undermined, then all other rights, even the most basic, become illusory (see for example Cofsky, 1996: p. 353); the right to vote is founded in natural law and emerged as a consequence of the social compact and of popular sovereignty. In line with this latter notion, voting is conceived of as a form of personal expression, a necessity for the development of one’s personal character. This, in turn, makes one a good member of society (see Brennan, 2011a: p. 45). A good person thus carries out her role as a citizen, and voting becomes the highest form of political expression. Would not, then, deprivation of a citizen’s vote make her not only “much less a citizen”, but also much less a person *qua* person?

Brennan argues that if I do not know what I am talking about, or if I know that I am prone to bias and error in judgment, then I show proper respect to my fellow citizens only if I abstain from partaking in decision-making (i.e., voting). According to Brennan, abstention under such circumstances is not a loss of power—not something that makes me less of a person *qua* person (or citizen *qua* citizen). Rather, to refrain from voting is, in this case, to vote indirectly by saying something like: “I want the best policy, but I do not know what the best policy is. Since the rest of you do know that which I do not, I indirectly vote that my vote reflect your wisdom”. The persons who make the decision do not rule over me because I willingly refrain from doing so and instead leave it to others to decide for me (Brennan, 2011a: p. 96).

There are two major problems to this argument, one that has to do with the notion of willingly giving up one’s right to vote, and another that has to do with the notion, which Brennan himself notices, that “bad voters” often do not know, nor can they know, that they are, in fact, bad voters. The following sections will discuss these problems, starting with the first concern; that of willingly giving up one’s (right to) vote.

3.2. Willing the Right?

Interestingly enough, to willingly giving up the right to vote actually was the case with some voters in the Swedish election of 2014. Being allowed to vote for parliament as well as municipality and county (or, in some cases, region), some voters chose not to exercise their right to cast all three ballots. The reasons given were lack of knowledge or interest in such policies, and some voters refrained because they did not know they were allowed to cast three ballots. When the latter was the case, when informed about their right to cast all ballots, about one

third of voters decided to cast a ballot for the election they did not know they were allowed to vote in, even when still expressing their ignorance about, say, municipality policies. Most commonly, voters who chose not to cast all three votes chose not to vote for municipality or county policies, but some actually refrained from their parliamentary vote. However, this behavior was relatively rare, and even though some voters willingly refrained from casting one or two ballots, they still did cast one or two votes for the remaining election(s), presumably finding themselves sufficiently knowledgeable to do so.

As Michael Tooley claims in his essay *A Defense of Abortion and Infanticide*, there is a conceptual connection between i) the rights an individual can have and the circumstances under which they can be violated, and ii) the actualization of the corresponding desires. According to Tooley, violation of rights involves frustrating the corresponding desire. Consider the following example: Jane owns a car. To be under the obligation not to steal the car is not, Tooley claims, unconditional. Instead, it depends in part upon the existence of Jane's corresponding desire. If she does not care whether her car is taken, then her rights would not be violated if her car was in fact taken³ (Tooley's essay appears in Feinberg (ed.), 1973: pp. 51-91). This line of reasoning can be transferred to having the right to vote—if someone does not care about her right to vote, depriving her of that right would not constitute a violation of said right. Or, vice versa, according to this logic, someone who does care about her right to vote could not be deprived of this right without also having her right violated. Brennan's argument to a great extent hinges on the assumption that voters willingly and freely not exercising their right to vote. This brings us to the second concern of his argument: that "bad voters" often do not know, nor can they know, that they are bad voters. Rather, such voters will often believe themselves to be informed and responsible (Brennan, 2011a). If a voter has a duty not to engage in collectively harmful activities, as Brennan claims, how could she be supposed to abstain if she does not know she is obligated to do so? One way out of this dilemma is to tell bad voters that they are, in fact, bad voters, thereby demanding of them to abstain from voting (see Caplan, 2007; Brennan, 2011b). In such a case, where someone does not measure up to the epistemic (and, in Brennan's theory, moral) demands that allows her to vote but who still desires to do so, her being deprived of this right must be justified some other way. Whether, and, if so, how, an individual should weigh her desires (e.g., should she desire the right to good-quality political decisions more than she should desire her individual right to vote if and when those desire contradict) might of course provide a "moral key", but it is not an enterprise on which I wish to embark at the moment. Instead, the following will discuss whether restrictions to the right to vote can be justified due to lack of knowledge (as defined in Section 2), given the plausible notion that most citizen do care about this right, for whatever reason. Let us, then, turn to the epistemic dimension of voting, starting with knowledge about the process of voting *per se*.

4. The Epistemic Dimension of Politics

4.1. An Unfair Process

If there are election supervisors present at the polls, who can quickly, easily and pedagogically⁴ tell unknowing voters how voting is done, then what is the problem with insufficient knowledge on the voting procedure? Voting is, simply put, "*a conventional means of expressing one's political preferences that can directly influence government in ways determined by the existing electoral process*" (Nathan, 2009: p. 277, my underlining). By voting, one participates in the electoral process on its own terms, and these terms can be seriously unfair. The consequences (i.e., outcomes) of voting are largely determined by the nature of the electoral process and the wider context in which this process is embedded. Unfairness is, by definition, built into the process to smaller or larger degrees, e.g., citizens are unevenly represented; the access to polls differ; voting districts are gerrymandered; or some citizens are barred from voting. Such unfair conditions of course differ between countries, but the point is that if there are no reasonable prospects of altering unfair electoral conditions by voting, or if voting rather perpetuates the unfair conditions of the electoral system, then these are important features of the know-how of voting.

³To be noted, one can think of cases where one does not care about her right to something although she "should" care about it, were circumstances ideal (she had not been indoctrinated not to care; she had higher self-esteem; she was not "unhealthily altruistic" etc.). This is an interesting argument, but I will here, for the sake of argument, assume that the desire of a right is based on caring for said right under ideal conditions.

⁴Of course, this may not be case—in the Swedish case, which I know best and therefore refer to here, election supervisors are not required to have in-depth knowledge on neither politics nor the voting system, even though they have to undergo a one day education. This may still say nothing on their ability to "quickly, easily, and pedagogically" transfer this information to others. That said, the one-day education is thought to provide the basic knowledge needed, and, at least in theory, election supervisors should be able to answer questions on "how to" regarding the voting procedure.

When not knowing what one does, or in what context one does it—in essence, what it *means* to vote—the vast majority of voters assume that the voting process is sufficiently fair. As a consequence, they vote for policies that will maintain the in-built, unfair status quo of the electoral system (see for example [Nathan, 2009: pp. 279-280](#)), thus (unintentionally) fomenting a system that is unjust and contravenes issues of mutual concern.

Widespread voter participation is often taken to indicate a significant degree of satisfaction with the electoral process, and some scholars suggest reductions of the minimal voting age in order to overcome mistrust and political alienation among the young. Being able to vote, it has been argued, would make young people more content with the workings of democracy and the results of politics (see for example [Hinrichs, 2002: p. 41](#)). This, however, may be an empirical falsity—during my work as election supervisor, I encountered the seriously meant question: “Which party do I vote for when I do not want party politics?” on more than one occasion. Some degree of voters also expressed severe mistrust in the fairness of the electoral process *per se*—not the inherent unfairness of the kind mentioned above, but rather those voters feared that they would be connected to a vote for a specific party, or they believed that “undesirable” votes would be simply thrown away when counted. Still others expressed deep mistrust with the democratic system altogether, and thereby justified their vote for, say, an extreme right wing party. Even though such votes were often meant as voicing unhappy feelings about the political system or political policies,⁵ they nevertheless counted in overall voter turnout. As Hanna Nathan observes, those looking at voter participation statistics have no means of subtracting those who wish to express dissatisfaction from those who are in fact satisfied with the electoral process ([Nathan, 2009: p. 282](#)).

Those who view the process as sufficiently fair often do interpret their participation in ways that support this view. Of course, there may also be those who actually want to perpetuate inherent unfairness of the electoral system—the US Republican party, as one example, makes no secret of their opposing restoration votes for felons. Moreover, elections in themselves suggest that the choice one faces is a choice worth making, which might well detract or outweigh worries about unfairness. This, in turn, raises the question of how we, as an electorate, can be permitted, let alone whether it can be demanded of us, not to take the opportunity to influence electoral outcomes. The answer is that it depends. Not only is it determined by the kind of unfairness built in to the voting system, it also depends on what the choices in the election are about. That elderly people have trouble getting to the polls may, for example, be considered unfair, but still less unfair than, say, a system in which districts are gerrymandered so as to give Afro-Americans less influence. If voting perpetuates the former unfairness, this may be outweighed by the choices of an election, even if these choices are in no way extraordinary. In order for the latter unfairness to be outweighed by the choices of an election, the choices must be of a higher dignity—suppose for example that an election poses the threat of a particularly horrid candidate being elected. In that case, the need to prevent such a candidate from coming to power might outweigh the unfairness of gerrymandering to the disadvantage of African-Americans (see for example [Nathan, 2009: pp. 281, 282](#)). This is to say that under circumstances where the unfairness of the voting system are great, and the choices of the election are not extraordinary, it is warranted that we, the electorate, are demanded not to influence electoral outcomes but that we should avoid perpetuating unfairness built in to the voting system. This places some demands on knowledge on the voting process. Leaving aside the most basic practicalities, what voters should know is the bigger context in which the voting system is embedded, a context in which circumstances of unfairness and dignity of election choices may be altered from time to time, in essence, what it means to vote under the circumstances of one’s voting system. Is this knowledge, then, reasonable to demand from citizens in order to be allowed to vote?

Even though the level of knowledge here requested may seem daunting, it is actually not very hard to acquire. Information on how voting districts are divided, where election stations are located, whether one must register to vote, who is not allowed to vote (e.g., felons and children) etc. is easily accessible in modern democracies. Likewise, come election time, information about candidates and parties abound. It is not very time consuming, nor does it require high levels of cognitive skill to learn the basics of one’s voting system and the broader context in which it is embedded. The societal costs of not knowing are higher than the personal cost of acquiring this basic information, and therefore it is plausible to require a basic degree of knowledge, as defined in Section 2, of one’s voting system in order to be able to vote. To be noted, though, as discussed in Section 2, this does not say anything on *how* a voter should (morally) vote. She might thus be, for example, a racist, but if she satisfies the “factual”

⁵To be noted, Sweden do employ free and secret elections, but that does not mean that voters are not allowed to express and explain their opinions to election supervisors. The latter are not allowed to engage in discussion or to have opinions on voters’ views—that would be a felony—but they often have to handle the delicate situation of someone expressing, defending, and justifying his or her view, more or less publicly.

knowledge here discussed, she also satisfies the here discussed demands for being allowed to vote. Whether this is too small a demand has been discussed elsewhere (see e.g., Brennan, 2009, 2011a, 2011b).

4.2. Acting Like a Child?

Although many countries still do base disenfranchisement on citizenship (e.g., only Swedish citizens are allowed to vote for the Swedish parliament) as well as desert (e.g. criminals are not allowed to vote in the US) and gender (e.g. women are excluded in Saudi-Arabia, for example), the only legitimate and accepted reason to exclude anyone from suffrage in contemporary democracies is that of competence (see for example Olsson, 2008: pp. 59-60). The case of children clearly illuminates this. The disenfranchisement of non-adults is part of almost all democratic voting arrangements (see for example Olsson, 2008), and, as Francis Schrag notices, any argument defending the participation of *all* citizens must explain the basis on which some persons are excluded (Schrag, 2004: p. 373). Children's disenfranchisement is justified by the strong, almost self-evident assumption that they lack the appropriate political knowledge and competence to vote; a strong epistemic criterion. Only mature people can make reasoned choices, and since children are not sufficiently independent-minded, they are easily influenced by their parents or other adults in their surroundings, such as teachers or supervisors. Also, being occupied with forming their own identity, children are thought to lack interest in politics, and not having the informed will required to responsibly partake in elections (see Hinrichs, 2002: p. 41). Instead, children are considered impressionable, impulsive, and unreasonable. Because of their being unreasonable (see Schrag, 2004: p. 371), and because only reasonable arguments merit consideration, the arguments of children should not influence public policy (see Estlund, 2008: pp. 60-61, 51-54; see also Schrag, 2004: p. 370).

However, the line between childhood and adulthood is not self-evident (nor is, of course, the line between serious mental illness and lighter forms, mental illness being a reason of exclusion from suffrage in some democracies). Minimum voting age is more an attempt to try to differentiate between competence and incompetence than a clear distinction between childhood and adulthood. Therefore, it has not so much to do with age *per se*, but rather the ability to think and reason in a rational, logical, and consequential way. Being a child is not in itself reason enough to withhold the rights of democratic participation. The incapacity to comprehend one's own personal and interpersonal rights, on the other hand, is. The exclusion of children, therefore, are justified by what they do not *know*, not by what they do not *are* (see Brooks, 2003; 99, 428-429). Children "*do not understand what is at issue in debates about justice and the decisions that must be based on them*". Since they lack the ability to reflect on which ideas of justice are likely to reflect their personal and interpersonal interests, i.e., what it means to vote, their status is not undermined by exclusion from collective decision-making (see Christiano, 2001: p. 207; Quotation p. 207). In short, children's exclusion from suffrage rests on the paternalistic assumption that since they do not know what is in theirs, or others, best interests, they, and others, are better off if children are submitted to the decisions of those who do. Democracy must retain a certain basic sense of rationality, and the competence argument maintains that the part of demos that unquestionably has no understanding of politics must be excluded from suffrage in order for democracy to work properly (see Olsson, 2008: pp. 59, 62).

This "lacking in understanding" part of demos is commonly translated to mean children (and sometimes the mentally disabled), and the claim that the same paternalistic measures should apply also to (less knowledgeable) adult citizens is often dismissed as faulting in respect. But why should the risk of unjust or harmful policies trigger paternalistic measures when it comes to children and not to ignorant and incompetent adults? If an action prevents harm and/or promotes benefit, then that is normally a valid reason for that action, and, as Kalle Grill observes, it does not take tremendous imperfections in knowledge to make for decisions that are harmful to the self and to others (Grill, 2010: pp. 10, 14-15), i.e., decisions that contravene issues of mutual concern. Consider for example John Locke, who likened the "unfinished man" to a child, driven by nothing but her passions, which makes her not only purely self-interested, but also outright dangerous. The "finished" person, on the other hand, is morally mature and has a sense of social responsibility; she seeks the well-being of all (see for example Held, 2005: p. 107). If man lacks the ability of self-reflection, she is "(...) *no good judge in [her] own case*" (Fukuyama, 2006: p. 172), i.e., unreasonable. While this may seem as a quite outdated, 18th century idea, Brennan claims that a voter who vote on the basis of peer pressure and emotional impulses rather than on good reasons thereby unjustifiably defer to others (see Brennan, 2011a: pp. 97-98)⁶ in the same way as children are supposed to do, were they allowed to vote. An individual is more rational vis-à-vis political policies when she sufficiently grasps

⁶Note though that Brennan does not refer to children in this section of his book.

the complexity and nuance of relevant circumstances whereas shortcuts, on the other hand, tend to make uninformed voters vulnerable to emotional, or even infantile, appeals, or to turn to simplistic stereotypes (see for example [Hoffman, 1998: pp. 461-464](#)). Forming beliefs in this manner imperils both the personal and interpersonal interests of a voter in the sense of potentially leading to policies that contravene issues of mutual concern and thus hinder government from representing the will of the people in any meaningful way. Therefore, what is at stake here is not imposing alien values and preferences on people (neither children nor less knowledgeable adults). If restrictions, such as knowledge demands for voting, can be justified by appeal to a person's own values and preferences, then it does not subject her to the will of others (see [Grill, 2010: pp. 9-15](#) for a discussion on paternalism and "personal good reasons"), and it is plausible to argue that the overarching values and preferences of a person are those of her well-being (and the well-being of those she loves, even though possibly not the well-being of *all* citizens if that would infringe on her own well-being). It is an approach aimed at protecting the future selves and others from shortsighted and foolish decisions made by earlier selves and others. Furthermore, there is a distinction to be made between exclusion from suffrage and a certain degree of demands for competence. While exclusion is permanent, demands of competence does not equal exclusion for all time to come.⁷ Since it is unlikely that some kind of test would accurately and once and for all determine whether an individual has reached a sufficient level of competence, it can only be viewed as a tool to track down and show real differences between competence and incompetence. It need not, as Estlund fears, be a formal and permanent subjection to the rule of others, *provided that there be opportunities for retrial*, both of citizen's comparative results, and of the criteria used for such comparisons. On the basis of this, if a "childlike" voter (unintentionally) foment injustice in, and by, the political system, thus convening issues of mutual concern, this would seemingly justify putting demands on her knowledge, as defined in Section 2, in order to be allowed to vote. However, Estlund raises an important concern of what he calls "invidious comparisons"—unfair and possibly offensive comparisons of citizen's political knowledge. This is the topic of the following section.

4.3. Unfair Comparisons?

By affording continuous opportunities for revision, democracy seems to diminish the epistemic burden on voters. If it is assumed that voters, over time, acquire more knowledge on important political matters, it can also be assumed that opportunities for revision can produce better-quality (although perhaps not "best-quality") political decisions (see [Fuesrstein, 2008: pp. 86-87](#)). This speaks in favour of voters' competence of acquiring political knowledge over time, and it is highly plausible that most (adult) citizens *could* meet the epistemic criteria defined in Section 2 if they put in the effort. The better real differences between competence and incompetence can be tracked down and shown, the less objectionable such divisions would be (at least in the abstract). This, of course, is not easily done. Even if true criteria of competence were to be formulated, it cannot be reasonably expected that this truth would be agreed upon by all qualified points of view—points of view are those that are not necessarily *True* in a strong sense, but that still are reasonable to hold in John Rawls's sense of the word (see [Estlund, 2008](#); see also [Brennan, 2011b](#)). To put epistemic demands on suffrage could have significant effects by invoking what Estlund calls "invidious comparisons"—unfair comparisons of citizens' political knowledge. To know, and publicly justify, which competence criteria to rely on cannot easily be done since it cannot be expected that all qualified points of view would agree on where to draw the line between competence and incompetence. No one is so obviously better at political matters that not some qualified point of view can deny it. To put competence demands on the voting population would thus rest on a basis not acceptable to all qualified points of view, and hence Estlund claims that it is unfair to use competence as a criterion for assigning political power ([Estlund, 2008: pp. 44-49, 51-52, 261-262](#)).

Not all comparisons among citizens are to be disqualified, which Sections 4.1 and 4.2 above have established—that children are excluded is not subjected to (much) controversy, at least not outside the academic world. And even this is not the end of the story. There is a further dimension to the epistemics of voting, one that to a high degree concerns "knowing the knowers": do we really want to endorse the practice of open elections to positions of power and influence if the recognition of some form of expertise is problematic? Knowing what implications for policy decisions a constituency's interests and opinions have require some form of political competence (see for example [Jay, 2009: p. 35](#)), as do the satisfaction of needs and protection of interests (see for example [Krouse, 1982: p. 45](#)). We do, for example, want a foreign minister who knows about foreign policy, and a minister of

⁷Nor, of course, do childhood—once coming of age—when you are no longer considered a child—you are allowed to vote. However, as long as you are under the age-threshold, you are not allowed to vote, regardless of your level of knowledge. Here, therefore, the exclusion of children is seen as more permanent than demands for competence.

finances who knows about (national) finances. Otherwise, the resulting policies could contravene issues of mutual concern. Knowledge among voters is important in this sense, so they are able to contribute to rational control of public policy. Ignorance, on the other hand, may potentially open the door for policies that err, in the sense of contravening “issues of mutual concern” (see for example Somin, 2004: pp. 1-3). A voter who does not comprehend that her voting does have consequences, and that those consequences may prove unjust, but who still holds qualified points of view, may (unintentionally) foment injustices in, and by, the political system. Remember the discussion in Section 4.1—if the system is significantly unjust, or if a candidate is specifically horrid, the consequences of not knowing what one does may be disastrous. As Christopher Jay observes, there is an important distinction to be made between not according some qualified, but opposed, point of view meaningful input into the decision-making process, on the one hand, and to punish someone for having such a point of view, on the other (see Jay, 2009: pp. 34-35, 37). While the latter cannot be part of any democratic arrangement, the former is a necessary condition if democracy is to function at all.

5. Concluding Remarks

This paper has examined whether knowledge in the form of knowing what it *means* to vote—that voting has consequences, and that those consequences may be unjust—can be demanded of voters in order to be allowed to vote. The above sections have established that such knowledge can be demanded, otherwise voters may unintentionally contribute to the keeping of an unjust and harmful system. Furthermore, comparisons of the knowledge of the uncontroversial kind here discussed are not to be disqualified (since they do not contradict issues of mutual concern). Thus, the answer to the question “Can some practical and theoretical knowledge be demanded of voters in order to be allowed to vote?” is yes. What this paper has not, on the other hand, discussed, is whether this is merely a necessary condition for good- (or at least better-) quality of political decisions, i.e., whether there should be epistemological and moral demands more controversial in kind. As David Estlund suggests, such demands would surely lead to better consequences and more justice, but while comparisons of uncontroversial knowledge are not to be disqualified, I strongly believe that comparisons of knowledge more controversial in kind (moral, religious, philosophical, and so on) would fall short on Estlund’s acceptability criterion. This tension gives incentives to further elaborate on the ideas on what role different theories of knowledge put forward by scholars (e.g. Brennan, 2011; Caplan, 2007) should play since this, in turn, gives a deep imperative to rethink the concept of representative democracy as a whole. The right to vote, and with it the right of being regarded as equals in voting, are cherished features for any Western democrat. Still, the findings of this paper give reasons to consider the, maybe provocative, idea that voting (and voting equality) is not the foremost important right in a political system that is to concern itself with the common good. Indeed, voting may be contra-productive to representative democracy,⁸ if we by “representative democracy” mean a rational system that by definition make decisions that deals with “issues of mutual concern”. When thinking about the role of knowledge in voting, the way in which representative democracy is conceptualized may well need rethinking as well. Theories on the role of knowledge—and what kind of knowledge—may be helpful in this task—to redefine what constitutes really representative democracy and good governance.

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Dr. Henrik Friberg-Fernros at the University of Gothenburg: Department of Political Science, for great advice, comments and support throughout the writing of this paper.

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⁸I wish to thank Professor Daniel A. Bell, Tsinghua University: Beijing, for discussing this matter with me via e-mail, September 2012.

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