Article

Politics, Philosophy & Economics
1–26

DOI: 10.1177/1470594X211065080
journals.sagepub.com/home/ppe

Are knowledgeable voters better voters?

Michael Hannon
University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK

Abstract
It is widely believed that democracies require knowledgeable citizens to function well. But the most politically knowledgeable individuals tend to be the most partisan and the strength of partisan identity tends to corrupt political thinking. This creates a conundrum. On the one hand, an informed citizenry is allegedly necessary for a democracy to flourish. On the other hand, the most knowledgeable and passionate voters are also the most likely to think in corrupted, biased ways. What to do? This paper examines this tension and draws out several lessons. First, it is not obvious that more knowledgeable voters will make better political decisions. Second, attempts to remedy voter ignorance are problematic because partisans tend to become more polarized when they acquire more information. Third, solutions to citizen incompetence must focus on the intellectual virtue of objectivity. Fourth, some forms of epistocracy are troubling, in part, because they would increase the political power of the most dogmatic and biased individuals. Fifth, a highly restrictive form of epistocracy may escape the problem of political dogmatism, but epistocrats may face a steeper tradeoff between inclusivity and epistemic virtue than they would like.

Keywords
political knowledge, political ignorance, motivated reasoning, objectivity, democracy, epistocracy

Corresponding author:
Michael Hannon, Department of Philosophy, University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham, NG7 2RD, UK
Email: michael.hannon@nottingham.ac.uk

"A learned blockhead is a greater blockhead than an ignorant one."

—Benjamin Franklin

A widely held belief is that democracies require knowledgeable citizens to function well. In *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters*, the most authoritative study on voter knowledge, the authors declare, "democracy functions best when its citizens are politically informed" (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996: 1).

If informed voters are needed for democracy to flourish, then a well-known threat to democracy is *political ignorance* (Brennan, 2016; Caplan, 2007; Somin, 2016). In a democracy, each voter has just as much formal political power as the next in the sense that we all get one vote. But when voters make poor decisions out of ignorance, they harm the common good. For example, false beliefs about COVID-19 may prevent action that would save lives. By adopting policies based on the views of ignorant citizens, we impose unjustified risks on innocent others.

On these grounds, Plato concluded that democracy is defective. Despite its initial attraction in offering freedom and equality to all, a fundamental problem with democracy is that it assigns "a sort of equality to equals and unequals alike" (Republic: 558c5). That is, democracy fails to distinguish between the wise, who are well qualified to govern, and the uninformed masses who are guided by ignorance and desire.

This has led some scholars to question the value of democracy. In *Against Democracy*, Jason Brennan argues that ignorant voters tend to harm their fellow citizens by exercising political power incompetently. Instead of providing equal political power to each citizen, Brennan says we should distribute political power in proportion to knowledge or competence (2016: 208).[1] While this might sound ominous and conjure up images of philosopher kings, a knowledge-based restriction need not involve authoritarian rulers. We need only to limit the extent to which uninformed citizens can risk harming others. This could be done through voter qualification exams, by giving extra votes to the better educated, or by some other means of establishing competence.

These are radical, epistocratic proposals. I do not endorse them.[2] But whatever you might think about distributing political power in proportion to knowledge or competence, it is widely accepted that political ignorance is a significant threat to democracy. The ideal of an informed citizen holds a cherished place in our system of values.

But are knowledgeable voters better for democracy?

I will argue that the relationship between political knowledge and voter competence is more complex than is often assumed by normative political theorists. In particular, I will defend the following five claims. First, it is not obvious that more knowledgeable voters will make better political decisions. Second, attempts to remedy voter ignorance may increase polarization because partisans tend to become more dogmatic when they acquire more information. Third, solutions to citizen incompetence must focus on the intellectual virtue of objectivity. Fourth, some epistocratic proposals are troubling, in part, because they would increase the political power of the most dogmatic and biased individuals. Fifth, a highly restrictive form of epistocracy may avoid the problem of political dogmatism; however, epistocrats may face a steeper tradeoff between inclusivity and epistemic virtue than they would like.

Partisanship, knowledge, and bias

Consider the following fact: the most politically knowledgeable people also tend to be extremely partisan (Converse, 1964; Federico, 2004; Feldman and Price, 2008; Hetherington, 2009; Kalmoe, 2020). For example, the strongest supporters of the Republican party tend to know more about politics than individuals with weak political ties. Likewise for Democrats. Now, this fact alone is not very surprising. The more we care about something, the more inclined we are to learn about it. Coffee lovers tend to know more about coffee; motorbike enthusiasts tend to know more about motorbikes; and the biggest sports fans often acquire extensive knowledge of their favorite teams. Politics is no different. The biggest political "fans" tend to consume the most information about politics (Somin, 2016: 93). This explains why those with strong partisan allegiances tend to be the most politically knowledgeable.

Partisanship is not an intrinsically bad thing. It plays an important role in motivating people to be more active citizens, it increases voter turnout, and it encourages citizens to protest injustice. The antithesis of partisanship is political apathy, which gives way to corruption, a lack of accountability, and the loss of democracy.[3]

The problem, however, is that the most politically partisan individuals (who are also the most knowledgeable, remember) are *also* the most likely to have their thinking corrupted by politics. Party identification operates as a kind of "perceptual screen" through which we filter information (Campbell et al., 1960: 133). This leads citizens to reason in corrupted, biased ways.[4]

A vast amount of work in cognitive psychology indicates that we all frequently interpret and filter evidence in ways that fit with our antecedent worldview. For example, we tend to seek out, uncritically accept, and better remember evidence that is favorable to our view; whereas we tend to avoid, forget, and be more critical of counterevidence (Taber and Lodge, 2006). This general human tendency is known as *motivated reasoning*. Broadly speaking, motivated reasoning is the tendency to seek out, interpret, evaluate, and weigh evidence and arguments in ways that are systematically biased toward conclusions that we "want" to reach. When this occurs, two people can look at the same body of evidence and yet walk away with opposite conclusions about what the evidence shows, thereby drawing undue support for their initial positions.

We all succumb to motivated reasoning. Our reasoning is especially prone to error or bias when it comes to beliefs that partly constitute our identity. I will call these "identity-constitutive beliefs". Identity-constitutive beliefs include any belief that reflects one's conception of "who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others" (Abrams and Hogg, 1988: 2). For politically partisan individuals, this will include their political beliefs. When we strongly identify with a political team, our political beliefs become partly constitutive of our identity. As a result, we are motivated to protect these beliefs from threats. This claim is backed up by decades of research in social identity theory (e.g. Green et al., 2002; Huddy, 2001; Kelly, 1988; Mason, 2018) and cognitive psychology (Ditto et al., 2009; Kunda, 1990; Lodge and Taber, 2013; Lord et al., 1979; Tavris and Aronson, 2008). When information threatens our values or identity, we mobilize our intellectual artillery to destroy it.

This is how knowledge can exacerbate epistemically bad thinking.[5] The more you know about a topic, the more "ammunition" you have at your disposal to find reasons to reject facts, figures, and arguments that conflict with your preferred views. To illustrate, Taber and Lodge (2006) investigated attitudes to affirmative action and gun control policies, comparing people who were more knowledgeable about these topics to people who were less knowledgeable about them. They found an *attitude strength effect*, such that those citizens voicing the strongest policy attitudes were the most prone to motivated reasoning, as well as a *sophistication effect*, such that the politically knowledgeable were more susceptible to motivated bias because they possessed greater ammunition with which to counterargue incongruent information (Taber and Lodge, 2006: 757). While the participants in the "low knowledge" group listed twice as many thoughts supporting their side of the issue than thoughts going the other way, the "high knowledge" participants found so many arguments in favor of their position that they often gave *none* going the other way.

Along similar lines, John Zaller (2004: 166) found that more knowledgeable voters were less responsive to the content of individual elections, tending to "resist short-term forces." In contrast, the *less-informed* voters were "more apt to reward incumbents who preside over strong national economies and punish those who do not," "more reactive to changes in the ideological location of the candidates," and "at least as likely … to respond to presidential success or failure in foreign affairs." To the extent that it is rational to vote retrospectively on the basis of these short-term forces, this behavior demonstrates that *less knowledgeable* voters are behaving *more rationally* than more knowledgeable voters.[6] On this basis, Achen and Bartels (2016: 294) conclude that *more knowledgeable* voters tended to ignore or downplay the very considerations that are typically viewed as an appropriate basis for electoral choice.[7]

In *The Enigma of Reason*, Mercier and Sperber (2017) vividly illustrate this worry—about using our knowledge to reach the conclusions we want—through the historical example of Sir Edward Coke. Coke was an English jurist of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, and "possibly the most learned common lawyer of all time" (Caenegem, 1987: 14). He was able to base his opinions "on innumerable medieval texts, most of them manuscript rolls, which he had perused with indefatigable zeal." The problem, however, is that Coke "was clearly hoping to find precedents that would suit his legal and political convictions," and he "misinterpreted precedents to support his case." According to Mercier and Sperber, "it may have been Coke that Sir William Blackstone had in mind when he warned, in his hugely influential *Commentaries on the Laws of England of 1766*, that a judge's knowledge and intelligence are no guarantee of fair opinion" (2019: 271). Blackstone writes:

> in settling and adjusting a question of fact, when entrusted to any single magistrate, partiality and injustice have an ample field to range in; either by boldly asserting that to be proved which is not so, or more artfully by suppressing some circumstances, stretching and warping others, and distinguishing away the remainder. (1768: 380)

Above I mentioned that highly partisan individuals may know more because they are simply more interested in politics, and knowing more tends to increase their enjoyment of

politics. (Recall the analogy with sports: fans will acquire knowledge of various teams because it increases the enjoyment they get from watching the game and rooting for their team.) However, the example of Sir Edward Coke highlights another reason that partisans tend to be more informed: they gather information to weaponize it. By acquiring more knowledge, they are more equipped to reject information that conflicts with their beliefs. This ability to effectively refute counterattitudinal information diminishes the psychological threat posed by such information.[8]

In summary, it is knowledgeable individuals who are the most partisan, who hold the strongest attitudes with the most confidence, and who are the most likely to use their information to conform their assessments of facts, figures, and arguments to their own political convictions.

This is not to say that political knowledge will, *by itself*, corrupt political thinking. It may be that increasing political knowledge is counterproductive only when it occurs in partisan individuals.[9] Thus, to be clear, I am not claiming that acquiring political knowledge is the *cause* of motivated reasoning or partisanship. Instead, it is likely that partisanship is the common underlying cause of both acquiring political knowledge and motivated reasoning. (The more one cares about politics, the stronger one's desire to learn about it and the greater the incentive to think in biased ways.) That said, it is also possible that an increase in political knowledge may cause a corresponding increase in strength of partisan identity. This, in turn, would increase politically motivated cognition. For example, Redlawsk (2002) argues that voters develop affect toward political candidates as they learn more information about them, which results in motivated cognition. I will leave this issue to the side. The point I wish to make is that, regardless of the direction of causation, there is a strong positive correlation between political knowledge, partisanship, and motivated reasoning. Thus, we cannot simply assume that more knowledgeable voters are better for democracy. Indeed, they may be worse for democracy if their stockpile of information is used to repel challenges to theories and policies that are incorrect or harmful.

Weaponizing knowledge

This idea goes against a simple, intuitive, widely held theory about politics, which we might call the *Ignorance Hypothesis*. According to this hypothesis, democracy is dysfunctional, in part, because citizens are relatively *uninformed* about political issues (Brennan, 2016; Somin, 2016). The cause of bad policies and decisions, according to this view, is often *too little information*.[10] The Ignorance Hypothesis is the basis for many civic education campaigns and science communication related to climate change, vaccine safety, GMO foods, and so forth. These education campaigns presuppose the "information deficit model" of public understanding, which assumes that more scientific knowledge would provide an adequate basis for deciding important public policy questions.[11]

But this account might get things backwards. Psychological research shows that the more information partisans get, the more dogmatic they become and the deeper their disagreements grow. An alternative hypothesis, which I'll call the *Weaponized Knowledge Hypothesis*, says that the more knowledgeable a partisan is about politics, the more

stubborn they tend to be about politically charged topics. If this alternative hypothesis is correct, then a smarter, better educated citizenry would not necessarily diminish polarization, lead to better policy decisions, or improve democracy. Indeed, it may just exacerbate political problems.[12]

The idea that "more knowledge is better" is misguided for another reason: it misconceives the typical basis of political allegiance. The typical voter's political views have little to do with knowledge and much to do with *identity* or tribal loyalty (Achen and Bartels, 2016; Brennan, 2016; Green et al., 2002; Huddy, 2001; Kelly, 1988; Mason, 2018). This contradicts the "folk theory of democracy" (Achen and Bartels, 2016). According to the folk theory, the average voter is assumed to be highly cognitive and rational: they gather evidence, formulate policy preferences, assess where the candidates stand on those issues, and then choose to support the candidate or party that best embodies the voter's own preferences, policy views, and values (ibid: 299). This is a *knowledge-driven conception of political loyalty*.

In reality, however, political affiliation is often psychologically akin to sports team loyalty (Brennan, 2016; Somin, 2016). Just as one's loyalty to a particular basketball team is not a reflection of one's pre-existing ideological commitments about basketball, one's political affiliation is not a reflection of one's political, moral, or otherwise ideological commitments. Rather, the typical voter becomes attached to a political team largely due to accidental historical circumstances. They are often born into their political identities, just as children typically inherit the religious affiliations of their parents. Partisans identify with a political team because of where they live, where they used to live, who they work with, their race, socio-economic status, and so forth. In sports and politics, people become fans through socialization. This is an *identity-driven conception of political loyalty*.

When politics is a matter of identity rather than epistemology, we can expect people who strongly adhere to political ideologies to have the following two traits: they are *knowledgeable* about politics; but they are also relatively *impervious to evidence and arguments* that go in the opposite direction. It is for this reason that deliberative conceptions of democracy afford little hope that partisans will be persuaded by the "unforced force of the better argument" (Habermas, 1998: 37). The typical person tends to avoid disagreement and obstinately defend their initial views, or they are persuaded to change their view by non-cognitive or irrational reasons.[13] Moreover, these effects tend to occur *more frequently and stubbornly among citizens who are relatively well informed* than among those who are not (Gunn, 2019: 42).

This creates a conundrum. It is widely thought that knowledgeable citizens are necessary for a democracy to function well. Yet the most knowledgeable and passionate voters are also the most ideological and therefore the most likely to think in corrupted, biased ways. The majority of the public may be shockingly ignorant of basic political facts, but it is *knowledgeable partisans* who are *the most closed-minded and dogmatic*. This leaves us with an uncomfortable tradeoff: do we want ignorant voters or informed dogmatists?[14]

One could argue that informed dogmatists are still instrumentally better for democracy than ignorant non-dogmatists.[15] This is an open empirical question that cries out for more investigation. Some evidence indicates that educated dogmatists have less accurate

judgments than less-educated non-dogmatists; for example, Hamilton (2011: 237–8) found that highly educated Republicans who more strongly identified with the Republican party had less accurate beliefs about global warming (as measure by scientific consensus) than less-educated Republicans with weaker ties to their party.[16] To the extent that accurate judgments are instrumentally valuable for making good political choices, this provides some tentative evidence that educated dogmatists might be worse for democracy. That said, my aim in this paper is not to argue that polarization and dogmatism are more significant defects for voter competence than ignorance. Instead, I aim to show that the relationship between political knowledge and voter competence is more complex than is often assumed. In particular, it is not obvious that knowledgeable voters will make better political decisions, since attempts to remedy voter ignorance may promote other vices like dogmatism. We may have to trade one incompetence for another, yet both can harm democracy.[17]

How ideology hijacks reasoning

It is not just knowledge that gives partisans more "ammunition" to reject unfavorable facts and arguments. Our *intelligence* or *critical reasoning* is often hijacked to protect our identity-constitutive beliefs. As Sharot (2017) writes: "If you perceive yourself as highly analytic—someone who has a strong ability to make use of quantitative data and a good reasoning capacity—brace yourself. People with stronger analytic abilities are more likely to twist data at will than people with low reasoning ability." Huemer (2016) makes a similar point:

> Normally, intelligence and education are aides to acquiring true beliefs. But when an individual has non-epistemic belief preferences, this need not be the case; high intelligence and extensive knowledge of a subject may even worsen an individual's prospects for obtaining a true belief. … The reason is that a biased person uses his intelligence and education as tools for rationalizing beliefs. Highly intelligent people can think of rationalizations for their beliefs in situations in which the less intelligent would be forced to give up and concede error, and highly educated people have larger stores of information from which to selectively search for information supporting a desired belief.

These claims are not mere speculation. In "Everyday Reasoning and the Roots of Intelligence," Perkins et al. (1991) investigated the relationship between education, IQ, and the ability to come up with reasons. They found that IQ was the most significant predictor of how well people argued, but it predicted *only the number of myside arguments*. In other words, smart people make good lawyers and press secretaries, but they are no better at finding reasons for contrary views. Likewise, Joslyn and Haider-Markel (2014: 919) found that "the most educated partisans are furthest apart in their factual understanding." Instead of providing "a real safeguard to democracy," as Franklin Roosevelt thought, education seems to intensify powerful partisan motives.[18]

Relatedly, Kahan and colleagues (2012, 2012b, 2017) found that people who score highest in cognitive reflection, scientific literacy, and numeracy are the most likely to display motivated reasoning.[19] To illustrate, consider the following experiment (Kahan

et al., 2017). People were presented with numerical data about the effectiveness of a skin cream for treating a rash. To arrive at the correct answer about the skin cream's effectiveness required some mathematical ability. Predictably, people who were better at math were more likely to get the answer correct. This is not surprising. What *is* surprising, however, is what happened when people were presented with a politicized version of the same problem. When the exact same numbers were presented as being about the effectiveness of gun control laws in decreasing crime, people's general math aptitude was no longer the best predictor of whether they would answer correctly. Instead, liberals tended to solve the problem correctly when the numbers indicated that gun laws were effective (a common view amongst liberals), but they tended to answer incorrectly when the numbers showed the opposite. The performance of conservatives was a mirror image: they did well when the numbers supported their prior beliefs and badly when the numbers didn't. Most disturbingly, however, is that the *better* people were at math, the *worse* they did when the numbers didn't support their prior convictions. This provides evidence that people with sophisticated reasoning skills will use them to wriggle their way out of evidence that disconfirms their political convictions. Other experiments have found similar results (see Nurse and Grant, 2020).[20]

These experiments illustrate the epistemically corrupting effects of politics. If knowledge is what gives partisans more "ammunition" to destroy threatening information, then intelligence is the "weapon". The more cognitive firepower at one's disposal, the more one is able to twist data and arguments to fit the conclusions one wants.[21] This debunks the idea that motivated reasoning is a trait of less intelligent people.[22] It also supports Hume's claim that reason is a slave to the passions.

The problem of epistocratic irrationality[23]

Democratic theory includes a great deal of concern about the possibility that voters know too little (see Somin, 2016). An underlying assumption is that smarter, more knowledgeable voters will make better political decisions. But, as I've argued, this assumption may be misguided. A sizable amount of evidence indicates that political knowledge, cognitive reflection, numeracy, reasoning skills, education, and knowledge of basic scientific facts can all *magnify* partisan bias and political polarization. This is true on facts relating to gun control, climate change, fracking, vaccinations, and other contested issues. In many cases, political knowledge may cause more harm than good. Thus, we should not only worry about political ignorance but also about the ways in which knowledge can exacerbate bias and polarization.

That said, these considerations do suggest an interesting possibility for how to ameliorate political ignorance. Recall that the strength of partisan identity predicts political knowledge: the more partisan we are, the more we tend to gather information about politics. If this is true, then a way to diminish citizen ignorance would be to increase the strength of partisan identities. The stronger one's loyalty to a political group, the more incentive one has to learn about politics. However, it is well known that stronger partisan identities often lead to political polarization: the more strongly we identify with our political "team", the more our perceived self-worth is heightened by discriminating against

opposing teams. We grow to dislike, even loathe, our political rivals. We therefore face another tradeoff: we can ameliorate political ignorance but at the cost of increasing polarization.

If my argument is correct, it may also cast doubt on some "epistocratic" solutions to voter ignorance.[24] In an epistocracy, political power is distributed in proportion to knowledge or competence. Brennan (2016) says we should seriously consider epistocracy because it would limit the damage caused by ignorant and incompetent voters. However, we risk enhancing the political power of the very people who are mostly likely to be biased, dogmatic, and polarized if we distribute political power on the basis of knowledge. This is because there is a strong link between political knowledge and ideological dogmatism. As I'll explain below, some versions of epistocracy may end up giving power to the very people whom Brennan calls political "hooligans" (2016: 5). In contrast, citizens who know the *least* about politics are also the least likely to participate in politics; as a result, these people are less likely to impose risks on innocent others. Thus, it is not obvious that individuals with more knowledge are sufficiently equipped to avoid making errors as damaging as those with less knowledge (see Gunn, 2019 for a similar point).[25]

To his credit, Brennan is aware that political ignorance is not the only cause of bad policies and bitter political battles. A great deal of his book is about political tribalism, dogmatism, and irrationality. That said, epistocracy is often characterized in terms of apportioning political power on the basis of knowledge. Adam Gibbons writes, "Epistocrats think that we should allocate more formal political power to those citizens who *possess more knowledge of politically relevant facts*" (forthcoming: 4, emphasis mine).[26] Moreover, a number of epistocratic proposals seem to distribute formal political power on the basis of knowledge. Consider a form of *restricted suffrage* that limits voting only to citizens who pass a test of basic political knowledge, such as a voter achievement exam (see Brennan, 2016: 211–14). An epistocracy that uses even minimally demanding voter qualification exams to test for political knowledge might be adversely impacted by the findings discussed above. The same concern will apply to *any* form of epistocracy that allocates more political power to those who possess more knowledge of these general political facts alone.

What about forms of epistocracy that do not merely test for political knowledge? While some of these may circumvent the problem of empowering polarized dogmatists (I'll discuss this below), it is not clear that all of them will. Indeed, the psychological evidence casts doubt on any version of epistocracy that distributes political power on the basis of epistemic traits that are known to predict dogmatism, bias, and polarization. For example, Mill claims it is "wholly inadmissible that any person should participate in the suffrage without being able to … perform the common operations of arithmetic" (1861: 174). But Kahan et al. (2017) have shown that numeracy can magnify partisan bias and error. Mill also recommends that "graduates of universities" should be granted additional votes. One might therefore recommend an epistocratic form of *plural voting* that gives additional votes to those with *more education*. In a recent defense of plural voting, Thomas Mulligan says, "education is the most likely candidate to serve as an accurate proxy for voter competence" (2018: 295). However, the research described above indicates that (a)

the most educated citizens are often the most partisan, (b) strength of partisanship positively correlates with cognitive bias, and (c) biased people will use their education and intelligence as tools for rationalizing their beliefs. The most educated partisans are also known to be furthest apart in their factual understanding of political issues (Joslyn and Haider-Markel, 2014: 919). Education can thus intensify powerful partisan motives.

Partisan bias and political polarization are also magnified by cognitive reflection, intelligence, reasoning skills, and scientific knowledge (see the previous section). Thus, the use of indirect tests that measure cognitive reflection, rationality quotients, and the like, may not be useful for determining political competence. Any form of epistocracy that allocates political power on the basis of these qualities might enhance the power those who are the mostly likely to be biased, dogmatic, and polarized.

Other forms of epistocracy might overcome the challenge I have presented here. A lot depends on the precise form of the envisaged epistocratic institutions.[27] If we could design selection mechanisms that identify citizens who are both knowledgeable and less prone to bias or dogmatism, we could amplify their political power without placing too much power in the hands of knowledgeable-yet-biased dogmatists. However, the use of such refined selection mechanisms will face two important obstacles, as Gibbons (forthcoming: 20) observes. First, these tests must be sufficiently precise to distinguish between rational, knowledgeable citizens and their equally knowledgeable but less rational peers. This might be easier said than done. As Brennan admits, "while it's relatively easy to distinguish high-information from low-information voters, it's more difficult to test for cognitive bias on a large scale" (2016: x–xi). Second, these tests must be feasible in the sense that they can be used cheaply and effectively, given large numbers of citizens. These problems are related: we may face a tradeoff between the reliability of the tests and their cost.[28] A challenge for the epistocrat is to explain how we can mitigate against this problem in a feasible way.

The virtue of political objectivity

If more knowledgeable voters will not necessarily make better political decisions, who will? I suggest we expand our focus beyond voter knowledge to examine the somewhat neglected epistemic virtue of *objectivity*. Objectivity, like truth and justice, is a heavyweight philosophical notion that has been analyzed and contested in countless ways. I hope to stay above the fray of these disputes. Below I will describe what I mean by "objectivity" and explain its political and epistemic value.

The term "objectivity" can be traced back at least to Walter Lippmann, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and influential critic of the media and democracy. In the early 1900s, Lippmann criticized the abundance of biased news reportage and called for impartiality in the gathering and reporting of news. In 1919, he co-authored a highly critical account of how the *New York Times* coverage of the Russian Revolution was distorted by cultural bias. Lippmann wrote, "In the large, the news about Russia is a case of seeing not what was, but what men wished to see." Lippmann's call for objectivity has been frequently misinterpreted as a call for "balanced reporting", which gives rise to

the problem of false equivalencies (where two or more sides are presented as epistemically on par, even when they are not). While balanced reporting is one way to fend off partisan attacks, it is not what Lippmann meant by "objectivity".

A good definition of objectivity is from Michael Bugeja, who teaches journalism at Iowa State. Bugeja says, "Objectivity is seeing the world as it is, not how you wish it were." This nicely captures Lippmann's own idea of objectivity. In his *New York Times* article, Lippmann encouraged journalists "to remain clear and free of irrational, unexamined, unacknowledged prejudgments in observing, understanding, and presenting the news." Lippmann's focus was on finding ways to help journalists defeat the distortions created by their own biases (see Jones, 2009: 87). Following Lippmann, I will define "objectivity" as *free of cognitive bias*.[29]

A lack of objectivity distorts judgment. It leads us to process information in biased, partisan, and motivated ways rather than in unbiased and rational ways. The more objective one is, the less one's pre-existing beliefs will color one's interpretation of the facts. The less objective one is, the more difficult it is to properly evaluate the evidence. Bias, or a lack of objectivity, motivates us to overlook, downplay, and misinterpret the evidence, arguments, and reasons against our preferred views. As psychologists have repeatedly demonstrated, we are often caught in a tug-of-war between accuracy and directional motivations. Objectivity, then, is the tendency to follow accuracy rather than directional motivations. It enables us to believe, think, and do what we epistemically *ought* to believe, think, or do, given the information and evidence we have.

Some people are skeptical of the very possibility of objective inquiry. It has been argued, for example, that scientific inquiry is a value-laden process and thus no "purely objective" method of inquiry is possible (Feyerabend, 1975). Inquiry will always involve a choice of questions, methods, and interpretation, which is where values inevitably creep in. I have a lot of sympathy for this view; however, I do not use "objectivity" to mean *value-free*. I use it to mean "free of cognitive bias," and it is certainly possible to let values guide us (e.g. the value of truth) without being cognitively biased.

Others are skeptical that we can ever be *unbiased*. They will say: *all* reasoning is motivated reasoning. I also have sympathy for this view. Indeed, this skeptical attitude may explain the popular idea that we are living in a "post-truth" world. As Blackburn (2019) writes, "Perhaps our era is distinguished by a slightly different malaise. It is not so much the idea that there exists a *truth* about things that comes under attack, as the notion that there can be *any such thing as objective inquiry* into it." But whatever we might think of the possibility of *complete* objectivity (i.e. a lack of *any* bias whatsoever), it is certainly true that we can be biased to a greater and lesser extent. After all, there is abundant research in psychology (some of it discussed above) indicating that people engage in politically motivated reasoning to varying degrees. It follows that some individuals are capable of being more objective (free of bias) than others. Thus, even if *total* objectivity is an unrealizable ideal, it is an ideal that can be approximated to varying degrees.

Objectivity has a crucial role to play in political environments characterized by partisanship and polarization. While many political theorists have worried about the extent

and depth of political ignorance, recent work in political psychology indicates that knowledge without objectivity may be unhelpful—indeed, it may be harmful to democracy. Politics is in desperate need of the type of citizens that Brennan calls *vulcans*. A vulcan, unlike a hooligan, is someone who thinks "scientifically and rationally about politics" (Brennan, 2016: 5). They are open-minded, sensitive to the evidence, intellectually humble, and capable of explaining contrary points of view in a way that the people holding those views would find satisfactory.[30] Vulcans are dispassionate, relatively unbiased, and lack the irrational tendencies of political hooligans.

Do vulcans exist? If such creatures must be *perfectly* rational or *completely* free of cognitive bias, we are unlikely to find any. Such people are as fictional as the vulcans in *Star Trek*. Nevertheless, a large body of literature is dedicated to techniques for debiasing (Soll et al., 2015). This suggests that we are at least capable of diminishing our tendency to engage in motivated reasoning, thereby increasing our objectivity.[31]

Precisely how to foster objectivity is an issue for psychology and applied epistemology. I will not say much about it here.[32] My aim is to emphasize the role and value of political objectivity, as well as to demonstrate that the problem of political ignorance is perhaps worse than we previously thought. More specifically, attempts to remedy voter ignorance may prove inadequate because partisans often become more polarized and dogmatic when they acquire more information. Thus, it is unlikely that we can improve voter competence by modestly restructuring incentives to increase political information among the average person. To solve the problem of voter ignorance, we must also attend to other vices.

I do not pretend it will be easy to cultivate objectivity. In some studies, despite efforts to promote the evenhanded treatment of policy arguments, we still find evidence of politically motivated reasoning, with substantial polarization as a result (Taber and Lodge, 2006). It is incredibly difficult for people to put aside their prior feelings and prejudices when evaluating evidence, even when they are instructed repeatedly to "set their feelings aside," to "rate the arguments fairly," and to be as "objective as possible" (ibid: 760). Even more worrying is the fact that individuals often mistakenly *think* they have succeeded in being objective. This is called the *illusion of objectivity* (Kunda, 1990; Pyszczynski and Greenberg, 1987). It often *seems* to us that we are being impartial and unbiased when we are actually twisting the evidence to support the conclusions we want to reach. In fact, the more intelligent one is and the better one's skills at presenting and defending arguments, the more powerful is the illusion of objectivity (Kornblith, 1999). This is yet another way in which reasoning or intelligence can lead to worse epistemic outcomes.

The dilemma of political objectivity

All of this has an ironic and unfortunate upshot: the people who seem the most capable of political objectivity are the least likely to participate in politics. Thus, the very people we need to improve democracy are often those who lack the motivation to be politically engaged.[33]

The reason for this, outlined above, is that partisanship, political engagement, and ideological dogmatism are intimately connected. The more politically partisan one is,

the more likely one is to participate in politics. But, as Brennan says, "political participation tends to corrupt rather than improve our intellectual and moral character" (2016: 18). We exhibit especially bad epistemic behavior when we participate in politics. We display high levels of bias, are unable to control our preconceptions, and are least motivated to be objective. This is because open-mindedness and objectivity are incredibly difficult when self-interest, social identity, and strong emotions make us want to reach certain conclusions. The more politically partisan we become, the more elusive is objectivity.

In contrast, those with weak and uninformed political attitudes show less bias in processing political information. Thus, it seems that objectivity may reside more in ignorance and apathy than in knowledge and democratic citizenship. If this is true, then we have been looking for rational citizenship in the wrong place. The theory of motivated reasoning predicts less bias (more objectivity) for uninformed and politically apathetic individuals because they lack the motivation and tools to engage in identity-protective cognition. Admittedly, this may be a sort of "dysfunctional objectivity" (Taber and Lodge, 2006: 768). But it may be the only sort of objectivity that many humans, crafted from crooked timber, can achieve.

Recall the experiment by Kahan et al. (2017) above. In this case, participants were able to address the task rationally and competently when the outcome did not threaten their identity-constitutive beliefs. It was their lack of personal investment in the issue that allowed them to use their mathematical abilities to carefully analyze the data. Their thinking was corrupted when their passions about gun control interfered with their ability to analyze the data objectively. We find similar results in Mercier and Sperber's book, *The Enigma of Reason*. Despite this book's optimistic line about our ability to reach accurate conclusions when we reason with others (as opposed to solitarily), the epistemic benefits of group interaction arise most clearly in scenarios where individuals have no stake in the outcome. For instance, humans are capable of reasoning well in groups when it comes to solving logical puzzles, such as the Wason selection task; but our ability to reason well—even with the help of others—is more compromised when thinking about issues that matter to us and when the cost of false belief is negligible.

We therefore face what might be an inescapable dilemma, which I'll call *the dilemma of political objectivity*:

> the more *motivated* one is to play the role of a democratic citizen, the less *cognitively* capable one is of meeting the epistemic requirements of rational behavior for democracy. In contrast, the more *cognitively* able one is of fulfilling the epistemic requirements of responsible citizenship, the less *motivationally* capable one is of fulfilling this role.[34]

In addition, objectivity is typically valuable only when one is relatively knowledgeable. There is little point in being unbiased if one is simply uninformed. (For example, I am completely ignorant about Venezuelan food, so I can be objective about it; but what good is that?) Thus, objectivity without knowledge may not be a type of objectivity worth wanting.

The ideal democratic citizen thus seems to reside in an elusive space. To be objective, one must be apathetic enough about politics to circumvent ideologically motivated reasoning; yet one must also be sufficiently knowledgeable about politics and willing to

participate. And yet by engaging in politics, we run the risk of letting it corrupt us. To cite Brennan once more, "Most common forms of political engagement are more likely to corrupt and stultify than to ennoble and educate people. Political engagement is more likely to turn a hobbit into a hooligan than into a vulcan. It is more likely to make hooligans into even worse hooligans than to transform them into vulcans" (2016: 55)

We are therefore left with yet another uncomfortable tradeoff: a promising way to promote objectivity is by reducing the strength of partisan identity; but by reducing the strength of partisan identity, people lose the motivation to learn about politics and be active democratic citizens.[35]

This is an utterly depressing thought. Let me try to conclude on a more optimistic note.

Was Plato right?

Informed partisans tend to use their knowledge in biased ways. But it is possible that the *very well informed* are more capable of objective thought. Achen and Bartels (2006) provide some evidence for this idea. They find that the views of Republicans and Democrats increasingly diverge as levels of political information increase from the bottom to the middle of the distribution of political information. However, they also find that "the pull of objective reality only begins to become apparent among respondents near the top of the distribution of political information … among the best-informed 10 or 20% of the public" (2006: 16). In other words, while increasing levels of political knowledge tends to further polarize Republicans and Democrats, there is a point at the very top end of the information scale when partisanship no longer dominates our thinking. Individuals who are *very highly* informed about politics may therefore be capable of resisting what Bertrand Russell called "a law of our being," namely, the desire to adopt beliefs that will "preserve our self-respect" (1928/2004: 51). As Achen and Bartels show, highly informed Republicans were more likely to acknowledge counterattitudinal truths, and highly knowledgeable Democrats were untroubled by any contradictions between the facts and their partisan expectations.[36] In contrast, reality seems to have had "virtually no effect on the responses of people in the bottom two-thirds of the information scale," and the influence of partisanship on perceptions peaked among the moderately well-informed respondents (Achen and Bartels, 2006: 21).

This suggests that increases in political information do, for the most part, deepen polarization and promote dogmatism, *but perhaps only up to a point*. Among those at the very top end of the political knowledge scale, the weight of reality might break through their partisan perceptual screen. As a result, the "informational elite" may be at least somewhat less dogmatic and polarized than the rest of us.

More empirical work is needed to establish this with any confidence. If the data reported by Achen and Bartels are reliable, this may provide us with some hope for the ideal of an enlightened citizen.[37] But this hope comes with two significant risks. First, increases in knowledge will still foster polarization and dogmatism in partisans *unless they reach the level of the informational elite*. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that most citizens will achieve this level of competence, as the literature on political ignorance makes clear. Second, the claim that objectivity can be found in a small group of

"informationally elite" citizens may make a *very restrictive* form of epistocracy *that much more attractive*. If so, this threatens our hope for an informed *democratic* citizenry.

The latter point brings us back to Plato's political epistemology. In the *Republic*, Plato infamously rejected democracy in favor of a highly restrictive form of epistocracy that limits political power to a small class of genuine experts (or even a single noble and wise philosopher king). The rulers of his utopian *Kallipolis* were not simply knowledgeable; they were supposed to be rational, unbiased, and reliable. Now, if it turns out that the most highly informed individuals are also less dogmatic and biased, then Plato's epistocracy may escape the challenge I have outlined in this paper. Should we therefore endorse a highly restrictive form of epistocracy?

This is not something I will attempt to answer here. An *epistocratic council* involving a relatively small group of highly competent individuals who are selected on the basis of extremely demanding qualification requirements might ensure that only the most knowledgeable *and* competent individuals are admitted.[38] However, it is worth noting that within debates about epistocracy, it is often assumed that *more inclusive* forms of epistocracy are better (on non-epistemic grounds) than less inclusive forms. For example, one version of Estlund's (2008: 215) "demographic objection" to epistocracy holds that unequal representation is inherently unfair. This may suggest that more inclusive forms of epistocracy are better (although Estlund will regard them all as unjust, they may not be equally unjust).[39] Likewise, Justin Klocksiem argues that political procedures with less-universal suffrage are *ceteris paribus* less fair than procedures in which suffrage is more universal (2019: 35). Even epistocrats like Brennan have said the case for epistocracy shouldn't "hang on the hopes of a philosopher king or guardian class" (2016: 14). As Robert Talisse (2018: 10) notes,

> In his discussion of epistocratic alternatives, he [Brennan] conspicuously leaves aside the straightforward option of installing a body of experts and abandoning popular suffrage altogether, opting instead to attend to forms that feature "some of the same institutions that we find in democracies" (2016: 208). Accordingly, the "forms of epistocracy worth considering" (2016: 208) all involve popular voting, public elections, checks on power, and considerable oversight.

Thus, an upshot of my argument is that epistocrats may face a steeper tradeoff between inclusivity and epistemic virtue than they would like. If only a small informational elite is both knowledgeable and unbiased, then the supposed epistemic virtues of epistocracy will not be realizable with modest epistocratic restrictions.[40]

Epistocrats may therefore face a dilemma. If they recommend a more inclusive version of epistocracy, they may end up increasing the political power of dogmatic and biased individuals; but if they recommend a less inclusive version of epistocracy, they may face challenges by those who think that only modest epistocratic restrictions are morally acceptable.[41] Either way, it is worth emphasizing that we need more empirical evidence to demonstrate that highly informed individuals (i.e. at the top end of political knowledge scales) are, in fact, more objective and less dogmatic than moderately well-informed partisans. While Achen and Bartels (2006) provide some evidence for this

hypothesis, there is currently too little data to support this view with much confidence. This strikes me as an area of research that is ripe for further inquiry.

Final remarks

Are knowledgeable citizens more likely to exercise their political power competently? As I've argued, the relationship between political knowledge and voter competence is more complicated than is often assumed by normative political theorists. Empirical work in psychology and political science indicates that politically knowledgeable individuals are often highly partisan and that partisans tend to be biased, dogmatic, and polarized. Thus, we should not simply assume that an informed citizenry will help to cure the ills of democracy. Indeed, attempts to remedy voter ignorance might further polarize the electorate and promote vices such as dogmatism and irrationality. This suggests that the problem of political ignorance is worse than we previously thought.

If this argument is correct, it may reshape our thinking about a number of important issues. As suggested above, it adds nuance to debates about political ignorance and epistocracy. However, it may also transform our understanding of three allegedly key mechanisms of a healthy democracy: a free press, reliable news, and civic education.

The value of a free press is often understood partly in terms of the need for politically knowledgeable citizens. For example, Dewey (1927) believed that journalism is important because it provides citizens with access to information that allows them to make informed choices. In the Dewey-Lippmann debate of the 1920s, however, Lippmann argued that one of the epistemic obstacles to public opinion is not an information deficit but rather *an information surfeit*.[42] The social world is immensely complex and people respond to information overload by selection. Our defense against abundant information is epistemic partiality: we screen out some information at the expense of other information, and this filtering prioritizes information that is congruent with our existing beliefs, values, and interests. In our high choice partisan media environment, political journalism may therefore contribute to polarizing the electorate, even if it increases the political knowledge of citizens. More disturbingly, some evidence shows that the more political media people consume, the more mistaken they are about politically relevant topics (Ahler and Sood, 2018). This damning result is consistent with the main argument in this paper: the more political information one has, the more distorted one's perspective might be. It also cuts against the simplest measure of the epistemic value of political journalism, namely, its ability to give those who follow it a more accurate understanding of politics.[43]

The concerns I have raised may also shift how we think about the problem of fake news. In recent years, one of the biggest perceived threats to voter competence has been the spread of misinformation online. Deceptive news is seen as a serious problem for healthy democratic functioning because it undermines the knowledge of the populace. However, recent data shows that the vast majority if fake news is consumed by a very small fraction of the population (Guess et al., 2018); moreover, fake news seems to have little impact on voters' beliefs. According to one recent study, "There is simply no evidence that social media are having a powerful and consistent influence on citizens' belief accuracy" (Garrett, 2019). In stark contrast, there is consistent and robust evidence

from decades of research indicating that *reliable* sources of information can exacerbate bias, dogmatism, and polarization in partisan individuals (as I've argued in this paper). Thus, recent calls for fact-checking, media literacy, and regulating the spread of online misinformation may misallocate resources the solving the problem of voter competence.

Arguments for civic education are often also based on the supposed need for an informed democratic citizenry. It is widely believed that education for democracy is the basis of any good polity. While I do not take my argument to cast doubt on the value of civic education *per se*, it does foreground important questions about precisely what epistemic virtues we should expect such education to instill. While it may increase levels of political knowledge, it might not promote intellectual virtues like open-mindedness or humility in citizens who are (or become) politically partisan. At the very least, we cannot simply assume that civic education and political literacy will protect democracy by repairing divisions in our society and helping to restore a common bond and sense of purpose.

This paper may also have implications for the ethics of voting. Brennan (2009) argues that we have duty not to vote badly on the following grounds: (a) we have a general duty not to engage in collectively harmful activities when the personal cost of restraint is low; and (b) voting badly is to engage in a collectively harmful activity, while abstaining imposes low personal costs. A consequence of Brennan's argument is that uninformed voters should not vote. However, his argument likely applies with equal force to biased voters. Indeed, Brennan acknowledges this. He says that one of the most common forms of bad voting is "voting from epistemic irrationality and bias" (2009: 538). So, if Brennan's argument about the duty to not vote badly is correct, then even highly informed voters may have a moral obligation to refrain from voting insofar as they owe it to others to be adequately rational and unbiased about their political beliefs. This may also put pressure on the view that we have a general duty to vote well (an idea that Brennan rejects). The duty to vote well may set an unachievable standard for most citizens, which would violate the principle that we can only be morally obligated to do that which we are able to do.

I take no firm stand on the issues mentioned in this concluding section. However, I hope to have underscored the importance of the central issue in this paper by highlighting just how much of our ordinary thinking about democracy and its associated institutions rests on the idea that democracy benefits from informed voters.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Kristoffer Ahlstrom-Vij, Jeroen de Ridder, Adam Gibbons, Ilya Somin, and two very helpful anonymous referees for their feedback.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. What type of "political knowledge" is required, exactly? I adopt the conception of what Zaller (1992: 221) calls "neutral, factual public-affairs knowledge." This is similar to the conception used by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) and many other political scientists who treat "political knowledge" as civic-style knowledge of the kind that is measured by traditional knowledge items in established political surveys (e.g. the American National Election Studies). It is this type of knowledge that scholars typically have in mind when lamenting the level of public ignorance. Moreover, this type of knowledge often correlates with policy preferences (Althaus, 2003). In particular, it positively correlates with policy preferences that match what economists and social scientists tend to think. Brennan (2016) assumes that economists and social scientists are more likely than laypeople to be right on matters of public policy, so knowledge of political trivia is treated as a good proxy for a more general competence. Gunn (2019) contests this claim.
2. I will discuss epistocracy at greater length in subsequent sections.
3. Guerrero (2014) develops a notion of "meaningful accountability". He says that voters must be sufficiently well-informed to hold leaders meaningfully accountable. Without such accountability, special interests are able to corrupt the legislative process because voters are unaware this is happening.
4. Two clarifications are in order. First, the notion of "bias" here does not imply that one is necessarily less likely to be correct. In some cases, a bias may lead partisan individuals closer to truth. But this does not mean there is nothing epistemically problematic with such a bias. Second, I leave aside whether members of some political groups are more likely to exhibit bias or irrationality than others. On that issue, see McKenna (2021).
5. For more evidence that knowledge exacerbates motivated reasoning, see Lau and Redlawsk (2001), Redlawsk (2002), Achen and Bartels (2006), Meffert et al. (2006), Shani (2006), Bartels (2008), Lodge and Taber (2013), Bolsen et al. (2015), Miller et al. (2016), Bolsen and Druckman (2018), Erisen et al. (2018), and Patkós and Szántó (2020). These studies show that knowledge does not correct or mitigate partisan bias in perception of objective conditions. Instead, it enhances politically motivated reasoning.
6. It is difficult to say what exactly are the appropriate bases for electoral choices. One might argue it is rational to ignore short-term factors and to vote always on the basis of party ideology. However, the evidence by Zaller indicates that low information voters are better able to "discriminate among messages on the basis of each year's content," which is seen as rational behaviour according to theories of retrospective voting.
7. That said, Achen and Bartels are also critical of the idea that voters can reliably form and act upon sensible retrospective judgments at election time (2016: 175). This is because voters tend to be *too myopic* when considering the economy and other factors, neglecting their own economic welfare beyond the past few months.
8. We do not "weaponize" knowledge *whenever* we use it to reject information that conflicts with our beliefs. For example, I might use my knowledge that the holocaust took place (acquired from reliable sources of information) to refute the claims made by holocaust deniers. This is

perfectly rational. We "weaponize" knowledge when we acquire or utilize information for non-epistemic reasons, such as identity confirmation.

9. On these grounds, one might argue it is possible to have politically knowledgeable-but-unbiased thinkers. I have two replies. First, while this is logically possible, it is unlikely because in practice only people with strongly partisan identities tend to seek out such knowledge systematically. This is why empirical tests typically find a strong positive correlation between political knowledge and motivated reasoning. Second, even if there are such unbiased-yet-highly-knowledgeable thinkers, it is unlikely that such people will care much about politics. This is because, in practice, those with strong partisan allegiances are far more likely to vote and be politically engaged. I will discuss both issues in more detail shortly.
10. Brennan (2016) acknowledges that bad policies are not only (or always) a result of ignorance; they are also due to irrationality, tribalism, and dogmatism. However, he also suggests that ignorance alone might sometimes leads to bad political decisions (see his "antiauthority tenet"). Thus, Brennan's emphasis on tribalism and irrationality is consistent with him endorsing the view that democracy is dysfunctional, in part, because citizens are politically uninformed.
11. Thanks to an anonymous referee for this point.
12. Klein (2014) makes a similar observation.
13. In some cases, it may not be epistemically bad to be closed-minded (see Fantl, 2018 and Battaly, 2018).
14. As Friedman (2006) points out, this dilemma is one of the main lessons of Converse (1964).
15. Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this objection.
16. See Malka et al. (2009) for a similar finding.
17. Even if polarization has equally bad or worse effects than ignorance, it is an open empirical question whether the ignorance problem is easier or harder to solve than the polarization problem. If the polarization problem is easier to solve through modest reforms than the ignorance problem, then voter dogmatism and bias might be less worrying than ignorance overall. This points to a limitation of my argument. The severity of the challenge I raise in this paper will depend on the feasibility of mechanisms that allow us to solve the polarization problem. I will discuss this in more detail later.
18. This is because education provides partisans with more information with which to counter incongruent facts. Moreover, the most educated citizens are often among the most invested in politics (Campbell et al. 1960; Zaller, 1992; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996).
19. For additional evidence that cognitively sophisticated individuals are the most politically polarized, see Hamilton (2011), Malka et al. (2009), Joslyn and Haider-Markel (2014), and Drummond and Fischhoff (2017). For a critique of the idea that greater analytic thinking magnifies political bias, see Tappin et al. (2020).
20. Kahan et al. (2012) tested levels of scientific literacy alongside ideology and asked people about the risks posed by climate change. He found that among the people who were already skeptical of climate change, scientific literacy made them *more* skeptical. Thus, the problem is not that people need to know more about science to appreciate the dangers of global warming. If that were true, their concern should have risen alongside their knowledge.
21. Motivated reasoning is also a common explanation for the spread of fake news. People are driven to accept fake news stories that cohere with their political ideology (Beck, 2017;

Calvert, 2017; Kahan, 2017; Singal, 2017). But see, Pennycook and Rand (2019) for a critique of this idea.

22. According to Aldrich et al. (1989: 132), "rationalization is probably greater for less-informed citizens."
23. I borrow the title of this section from Gibbons (forthcoming), who defends epistocracy from the problem I am outlining.
24. Later I will explain why highly restrictive forms of epistocracy may escape this challenge.
25. In reply, an epistocrat could argue that epistocracy with dogmatic-but-knowledgeable citizens is still instrumentally better than democracy with non-dogmatic-but-ignorant citizens. As mentioned in Weaponizing knowledge, this is an open empirical question. As Brennan himself admits, "It's hard to know whether epistocracy [including epistocracy with dogmatic-but-knowledgeable citizens] would be better [than democracy], because we have not really tried it" (2016: 205).
26. See also Estlund (2008), Mulligan (2018), and Malcolm (2021).
27. Gibbons (forthcoming) attempts to defend some versions of epistocracy from the challenge I have outlined here. I suspect that Guerrero's (2014) lottocracy might also avoid the problem of informed dogmatists; however, it is unclear whether lottocracy is a type of epistocracy.
28. As Gibbons says, "while direct measures [of epistemic rationality] are far more accurate than indirect measures, their use is likely not feasible for an arrangement such as plural voting, for subjecting large numbers of citizens to these measures is likely too expensive and too time-consuming" (forthcoming: 22).
29. There are two other senses of "objectivity" that diverge from how I use this term. First, the word is commonly used to demarcate judgements that concern matters of empirical and mathematical fact, in contrast to more "subjective" judgments concerning matters of value or preferences (e.g. "coffee without sugar is gross"). Second, "objectivity" sometimes means *neutral* in the sense of having no opinion on the matter. I do not use the term in either of these ways.
30. A vulcan is capable of passing what Caplan (2011) calls the "ideological turing test." It works like this: a partisan individual is invited to answer questions (or write an essay) posing as his or her ideological opponent. If a neutral judge (or perhaps even a political adversary) cannot tell the difference between the partisan's answers and the answers of his or her political opponent, the candidate is judged to correctly understand the opposing perspective.
31. However, Ahlstrom-Vij (2013) argues that attempts to debias oneself are typically unlikely to succeed.
32. That said, I will briefly mention two possible strategies for fostering objectivity. First, some defenders of epistemic conceptions of deliberative democracy argue that carefully designed deliberative forums—sometimes called "mini publics"—are successful at getting citizens to think about political issues in a more informed and more objective way. So, my argument may highlight the need to ensure that deliberative forums are properly designed (see Landemore, 2013: 122). A second strategy is to reduce the strength of partisan identity. According to the research discussed above, the most highly partisan individuals are also the most likely to engage in politically motivated reasoning. Thus, a way to foster political objectivity may be to reduce the strength of partisan identity. I will discuss a dilemma for this proposal shortly.
33. This is closely related to work by Mutz (2006). One of her central findings is that participatory democracy is at odds with deliberative democracy. More specifically, her research shows that

exposure to diverse perspectives and deliberating with people who hold contrary views tends to make citizens ambivalent and apathetic about politics. As a result, they are less likely to participate in politics (Mutz, 2006: 120). In contrast, the most politically active citizens rarely talk to people who have different opinions and they tend to be worse at explaining the rationale behind contrary viewpoints.

34. We are also unlikely to foster objectivity in politics if Caplan (2007) is correct that a lack of political objectivity is instrumentally rational. However, Somin (2016) suggests that we can overcome the problem by shifting decision-making to mechanisms where people have active incentives to seek out truth.
35. This may not be entirely bad. According to Talisse (2019), we are currently "overdoing democracy" and need to lessen the extent to which politics contaminates our daily interactions with others.
36. That said, Kahan et al. (2017) found that political polarization did not abate at the highest levels of cognitive sophistication.
37. It can also be seen as a vindication of expertise. While some people delight in pointing out that experts themselves nourish all kinds of biases, we can interpret the above data as evidence that experts are more objective (see Kahan et al. 2016).
38. See Brennan (2016: 215–218) for a discussion of epistocratic councils.
39. Jeffrey (2018) defends a form of "limited epistocracy" and Mulligan (2018) discusses the need for epistocratic systems that expand the suffrage while distributing formal power unequally.
40. Brennan's preferred form of epistocracy, which he calls government by *simulated oracle* (2016: 220–222), allows every citizen to vote, so political power would not be distributed on the basis of knowledge or competence. On this proposal, information about voters' level of knowledge and demographics is used to simulate what the electorate would prefer if they were fully informed, thereby revealing the "enlightened" preferences of the populace. This version of epistocracy may escape the challenge I have raised in this paper. However, it is controversial whether simulated oracle even qualifies as epistocratic rather than democratic, as argued by Talisse (2018) and as Brennan himself comes very close to acknowledging (2021: 381).
41. Gibbons (forthcoming: 22–23) acknowledges this dilemma. While he attempts to defend epistocracy from the challenge I have outlined, he admits that forms of epistocracy involving very large numbers of citizens (e.g. restricted suffrage and plural voting) are the least plausible given the worries I have presented here.
42. See Friedman (2019) for a brilliant analysis of the Lippmann-Dewey debate on this issue. Friedman persuasively argues that Lippmann was right.
43. A common worry is that modern media promotes polarization by locking us into echo chambers. This presumes that polarization will decrease if citizens are able to cross the informational aisle. However, one of the largest studies conducted that tested this theory found that exposure to voices from the other side increased polarization (Bali et al. 2018).

References

Abrams D and Hogg M (1988) Comments on the motivational status of self-esteem in social identity and intergroup discrimination. *European Journal of Social Psychology* 18(4): 317–334.

Achen CH and Bartels LM (2006) It feels like we're thinking: The rationalizing voter and electoral democracy. In: *Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association*, Philadelphia, Vol. 30. Available at: https://grist.files.wordpress.com/2010/04/thinking.pdf (accessed December 29, 2021).

Achen CH and Bartels LM (2016) *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections do not Produce Responsive Government*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Ahler D and Sood G (2018) The parties in our heads: Misperceptions about party composition and their consequences. *The Journal of Politics* 80(3): 964–981.

Ahlstrom-Vij K (2013) Why we cannot rely on ourselves for epistemic improvement. *Philosophical Issues* 23(1): 276–296.

Aldrich JH, Sullivan JS and Borgida E (1989) Foreign affairs and issue voting: Do presidential candidates "waltz before a blind audience? *American Political Science Review* 83(1): 123–141.

Althaus SL (2003) *Collective Preferences in Democratic Politics: Opinion Surveys and the Will of the People*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Bali CA, Argyle LP, Brown TW, et al. (2018) Exposure to opposition views on social media can increase political polarization. *PNAS* 115(37): 9216–9221.

Bartels LM (2008) *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Battaly H (2018) Can closed-mindedness be an intellectual virtue? *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 84: 23–45.

Beck J (2017) This article won't change your mind: The fact on why facts alone can't fight false beliefs. *The Atlantic*. Available at: https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2017/03/this-article-wont- change-your-mind/519093/

Blackburn S (2019) How can we teach objectivity in a post-truth era? *New Statesman*. Available at: https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2019/02/how-can-we-teach-objectivity-post-truth-era

Blackstone W (1768/1979) *Of Private Wrongs. Vol. 3 of Commentaries on the Laws of England*. Facsimile of the first edition. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.

Bolsen T and Druckman JN (2018) Do partisanship and politicization undermine the impact of a scientific consensus message about climate change? *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations* 21(3): 389–402.

Bolsen T, Druckman JN and Cook FL (2015) Citizens', scientists', and policy advisors' beliefs about global warming. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 658(1): 271–295.

Brennan J (2009) Polluting the polls: When citizens should not vote. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 87(4): 535–549.

Brennan J (2016) *Against Democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Brennan J (2021) In defense of epistocracy: Enlightened preference voting. In: Hannon M and de Ridder J (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Political Epistemology*. London: Routledge, pp. 374–383.

Caenegem RC (1987) *Judges, Legislators and Professors: Chapters in European Legal History*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Calvert D (2017) *The psychology behind fake news*. Available at: https://insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu/article/the-psychology-behind-fake-news

Campbell A, Converse PE, Miller WE, et al. (1960) *The American Voter*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Caplan B (2007) *The Myth of the Rational Voter*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Caplan B (2011) *The Ideological Turing Test*. Available at: https://www.econlib.org/archives/2011/06/ the_ideological.html

Converse P (1964) The nature of belief systems in mass publics. In: Apter D (ed) *Ideology and Discontent*. New York, NY: Free Press, pp. 206–261.

Delli Carpini MX and Keeter S (1996) *What Americans Know About Politics and Why it Matters*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Dewey J (1927) *The Public and Its Problems*. New York, NY: Holt Publishers.

Ditto PH, Pizarro DA and Tannenbaum D (2009) Motivated moral reasoning. *Psychology of Learning and Motivation* 50: 307–338.

Drummond C and Fischhoff B (2017) Individuals with greater science literacy and education have more polarized beliefs on controversial science topics. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 114(36): 9587–9592.

Erisen C, Redlawsk DP and Erisen E (2018) Complex thinking as a result of incongruent information exposure. *American Politics Research* 46(2): 217–245.

Estlund D (2008) *Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Fantl J (2018) *The Limitations of the Open Mind*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Federico C (2004) Predicting attitude extremity: The interactive effects of schema development and the need to evaluate and their mediation by evaluative integration. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 30: 1281–1294.

Feldman L and Price V (2008) Confusion or enlightenment? How exposure to disagreement moderates the effects of political discussion and media use on candidate knowledge. *Communication Research* 35(1): 61–87.

Feyerabend P (1975) *Against Method*. London: Verso.

Friedman J (2006) Democratic competence in normative and positive theory: Neglected implications of "the nature of belief systems in mass publics". *Critical Review* 18(1–3): 1–43.

Friedman J (2019) *Power Without Knowledge*. Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press.

Garrett RK (2019) Social media's contribution to political misperceptions in U.S. presidential elections. *PLoS ONE* 14(3): e0213500.

Gibbons A (Forthcoming) Is epistocracy irrational? *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*: 1–40.

Green DP, Palmquist B and Schickler E (2002) *Partisan Hearts and Minds: Political Parties and the Social Identities of Voters*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Guerrero A (2014) Against elections: The lottocratic alternative. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 42(2): 135–178.

Guess A, Nyhan B and Reifler J (2018) Selective exposure to misinformation: Evidence from the consumption of fake news during the 2016 US presidential campaign. *European Research Council* 9(3): 4.

Gunn P (2019) Against epistocracy. *Critical Review* 31(1): 26–82.

Habermas J (1998) *On the Pragmatics of Communication*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Hamilton LC (2011) Education, politics and opinions about climate change evidence for interaction effects. *Climatic Change* 104(2): 231–242.

Hetherington MJ (2009) Putting polarization in perspective. *British Journal of Political Science* 39(2): 413–448.

Huddy L (2001) From social to political identity: A critical examination of social identity theory. *Political Psychology* 22(1): 127–156.

Huemer M (2016) Why people are irrational about politics. In: Anomaly J, Brennan G, Munger M and Sayre-McCord G (eds) *Philosophy, Politics, and Economics: An Anthology*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, pp. 456–467.

Jeffrey A (2018) Limited epistocracy and political inclusion. *Episteme; Rivista Critica Di Storia Delle Scienze Mediche E Biologiche* 15(4): 412–432.

Jones A (2009) *Losing the News: The Future of the News that Feeds Democracy*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Joslyn MR and Haider-Markel DP (2014) Who knows best? Education, partisanship, and contested facts. *Politics and Policy* 42(6): 919–947.

Kahan DM (2012b) Ideology, motivated reasoning, and cognitive reflection: An experimental study. *Judgment and Decision making* 8: 407–424.

Kahan DM (2017) Misconceptions, misinformation, and the logic of identity-protective cognition. Available at SSRN: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2973067: 1–9.

Kahan DM, Peters E, Wittlin M, et al. (2012) The polarizing impact of science literacy and numeracy on perceived climate change risks. *Nature Climate Change* 2(10): 732–735.

Kahan DM, Hoffman D, Evans D, et al. (2016) "Ideology" or "situated sense"? An experimental investigation of motivated reasoning and professional judgment. *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 164(2): 349–439.

Kahan DM, Peters E, Dawson EC, et al. (2017) Motivated numeracy and enlightened self-government. *Behavioural Public Policy* 1(1): 54–86.

Kalmoe NP (2020) Uses and abuses of ideology in political psychology. *Political Psychology* 41(4): 771–793.

Kelly C (1988) Intergroup differentiation in a political context. *British Journal of Social Psychology* 27: 319–332.

Klein E (2014) How Politics Makes Us Stupid. *Vox*. Available at: https://www.vox.com/2014/4/6/5556462/brain-dead-how-politics-makes-us-stupid

Klocksiem J (2019) Epistocracy is a Wolf in Wolf's clothing. *The Journal of Ethics* 23: 19–36.

Kornblith H (1999) Distrusting reason. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 23: 181–196.

Kunda Z (1990) The case for motivated reasoning. *Psychological Bulletin* 108(3): 480–498.

Landemore H (2013) *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Lau RR and Redlawsk DP (2001) Advantages and disadvantages of cognitive heuristics in political decision making. *American Journal of Political Science* 45(4): 951–971.

Lodge M and Taber CS (2013) *The Rationalizing Voter*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Lord CG, Ross L and Lepper MR (1979) Biased assimilation and attitude polarization: The effects of prior theories on subsequently considered evidence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37(11): 2098–2109.

McKenna R (2021) Asymmetrical irrationality: Are only other people stupid? In: Hannon M and de Ridder J (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Political Epistemology*. London: Routledge, pp. 285–295.

Malcolm F (2021) Epistocracy and Public Interests. *Res Publica*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11158-021-09502-7.

Malka A, Krosnick JA and Langer G (2009) The association of knowledge with concern about global warming: Trusted information sources shape public thinking. *Risk Analysis: An International Journal* 29(5): 633–647.

Mason L (2018) *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Meffert MF, Chung S, Joiner AJ, et al. (2006) The effects of negativity and motivated information processing during a political campaign. *Journal of Communication* 56(1): 27–51.

Mercier H and Sperber D (2017) *The Enigma of Reason*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Mill JS (1861/1991) *Considerations on Representative Government*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.

Miller JM, Saunders KL, and Farhart CE (2016) Conspiracy endorsement as motivated reasoning: The moderating roles of political knowledge and trust. *American Journal of Political Science* 60(4): 824–844.

Mulligan T (2018) Plural voting for the twenty-first century. *The Philosophical Quarterly* 68(271): 286–306.

Mutz DC (2006) *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative Versus Participatory Democracy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Nurse M and Grant WJ (2020) I'll see it when I believe it: Motivated numeracy in perceptions of climate change risk. *Environmental Communication* 14(2): 184–201.

Patkós V and Szántó A (2021) Does sophistication increase partisan bias? Evidence from a cross-national analysis. *European Politics and Society* 22(3): 359–373.

Pennycook G and Rand DG (2019) Lazy, not biased: Susceptibility to partisan fake news is better explained by lack of reasoning than by motivated reasoning. *Cognition* 188: 39–50.

Perkins DN, Farady M and Bushey B (1991/2012) Everyday reasoning and the roots of intelligence. In: Voss JF, Perkins DN and Segal JW (eds) *Informal Reasoning and Education*. London: Routledge, pp.101–124.

Plato (1997) Republic. In: Cooper JM (ed) *Plato: Complete Works*. New York: Hackett Publishing, pp. 971–1223.

Pyszczynski T and Greenberg J (1987) Toward an integration of cognitive and motivational perspectives on social inference: A biased hypothesis-testing model. In: Berkowitz L (ed) *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*. Cambridge, MA: Academic Press, pp. 297–340.

Redlawsk DP (2002) Hot cognition or cool consideration? Testing the effects of motivated reasoning on political decision making. *Journal of Politics* 64: 1021–1044.

Russell B (1928/2004) *Sceptical Essays*. London: Routledge.

Shani D (2006) Knowing your colors: Can knowledge correct for partisan bias in political perceptions? In: *Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association*, Working paper.

Sharot T (2017) *The Influential Mind: What the Brain Reveals About our Power to Change Others*. New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company.

Singal J (2017) This is a great psychological framework for understanding how fake news spreads. *New York Magazine*. Available at: https://www.thecut.com/2017/01/a-great-psychological-framework-for-understanding-fake-news.html

Soll JB, Milkman KL and Payne JW (2015) *A User's Guide to Debiasing. The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Judgment and Decision Making*. Wiley: Blackwell.

Somin I (2016) *Democracy and Political Ignorance: Why Smaller Government is Smarter*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

Taber CS and Lodge M (2006) Motivated skepticism in the evaluation of political beliefs. *American Journal of Political Science* 50(3): 755–769.

Talisse R (2018) The trouble with hooligans. *Inquiry: A Journal of Medical Care Organization, Provision and Financing*: 1–12. Doi: 10.1080/0020174X.2018.1502933.

Talisse R (2019) *Overdoing Democracy*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Tappin BM, Pennycook G and Rand DG (2020) Bayesian or biased? Analytic thinking and political belief updating. 204: 104375.

Tavris C and Aronson E (2008) *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Zaller J (1992) *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Zaller J (2004) Floating voters in US presidential elections, 1948–2000. In: Saris WE and Sniderman PM (eds) *Studies in Public Opinion: Attitudes, Nonattitudes, Measurement Error, and Change*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp.166–212.

Author biography

Michael Hannon is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Nottingham. He is also Honorary Director of the Aristotelian Society, a Faculty Fellow (2021–22) at The Murphy Institute, and author of *What's the Point of Knowledge?* (Oxford University Press, 2019).