Why Not a Philosopher King? and Other Objections to Epistocracy

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Epistocracy, as the idea that those who have special epistemic position should rule, has a long history. It has been around at least since Plato and his idea that the rule should be entrusted to wise philosopher kings, it saw a later reincarnation in work of J.S. Mill, who suggested that political rights should be (nearly) universal, but not equal – educated and professionals would have more votes than uneducated or menial labourers.

Recently, this ancient idea is witnessing a revival. Contemporary proponents of epistocracy use an abundance of empirical evidence produced by economists and political scientists to conclude that many or even most voters do not have knowledge, rationality nor reasonableness to vote in a right way, and argue that we should limit franchise to those who have these qualities. In this way we are more likely to achieve goals (whatever they might be) (Brennan 2016; see also Estlund 2008).

The basic argument for epistocracy starts from the assumption that equal political rights have no intrinsic value (see for example Wall 2007) and democracy does not have a privileged epistemic status (Brennan 2016). Any value democracy has is mainly in the fact that it tends to produce better outcomes than other political arrangements. Epistocrats argue that, if we accept this assumption, there is no reason to prefer democracy to other political systems which may produce even better outcomes. Additionally, independent of outcomes, equal political rights may have some value, but they are not to be considered basic rights and can be defeated by other considerations.

In this paper I am going to offer an internal critique of epistocracy. I am going to accept the argument for epistocracy and argue that it produces several epistemic and logical problems in trying to define who should be the members of an epistocratic polity. I will also suggest that some of the problems epistocracy attempts to correct can be solved in a more just way, while preserving democracy. I am going to focus on the following issues: what is the level of knowledge required for political rights, who is going to identify members of epistocratic polity and how, why not go for philosopher king, and finally I am going to revisit demographic objection raised by David Estlund (Estlund 2008; Brennan 2016, 2017).

**References:**

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