Can Epistocracy, or Knowledge-Based Voting, Fix Democracy?

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Elected officials tend to pass laws they believe will appeal to the median voter. A politician on the left or right usually can win more votes by moving to the center, a theory you can see in action by watching how presidential candidates soften their policies after the primaries.

The median voter wields great power over what politicians ultimately do. But — and here's the problem — the median voter would fail economics or Political Science 101.

For 60 years, political scientists have studied what voters actually know. The results are depressing. Hundreds of different surveys, such as the American National Election Studies, find that the median voter is ignorant or misinformed not only about the social sciences needed to evaluate candidates' policy proposals, but even of basic facts and trends, such as what the unemployment rate is and whether it's going up or down.

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This isn't because public schools fail us. It's not because Fox News or MSNBC (take your pick) bamboozles poor voters with well-crafted lies. It's not because people are inherently stupid or unable to think for themselves. It's because democracy gives us the wrong incentives.

How we vote matters, but how any one of us votes does not. The chance an individual vote will make a difference is vanishingly small. Thus, we have little incentive to gather relevant information so that we can cast our votes in careful, thoughtful ways. Votes are like lottery tickets. Winning the lottery changes everything, but an individual lottery ticket is nearly worthless. If a philanthropist offered to pay you $10 million if you could pass Economics 101, you'd probably learn basic economics. But if the same philanthropist offered you a 1 in 100 million chance of winning $10 million if you could pass Economics 101, you'd stay ignorant.

While not everything governments do is decided by voters — bureaucracies, parties and officials have significant independence — what voters want makes a difference. And since voters are generally uninformed, we get worse policies that we would with a better-informed electorate. For instance, high-information voters (regardless of race, income or gender) tend to support free trade, while low-information voters have the opposite view; the latter may well force politicians to squelch the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which most experts agree is good for the global economy.

We cannot "fix" this problem because it's a built-in feature of democracy. So maybe it's time to consider an alternative to democracy called epistocracy. In a democracy, every
citizen gets an equal right to vote. In an epistocracy, voting power is widespread, but votes are weighted: More knowledgeable citizens' votes count more.

Relatively speaking, representative democracies function rather well: They are in general more prosperous and protect citizens' rights better than other forms of government. An epistocracy would try to copy what makes democracies work, but do it better. Epistocracies should keep some things — like our basic rights — off the bargaining table. They should make power widespread because concentrating power among the few invites abuse. Epistocracies should have constitutional limits on power, judicial review, checks and balances and a bill of rights — just like representative democracies.

Epistocracy comes in many forms. An epistocracy might give everyone one vote, then grant extra votes to citizens who pass a test of basic political knowledge (such as the citizenship exam). Or it might grant the right to vote only to citizens who pass such a test. Or it might instead hold an "enfranchisement lottery": Immediately before an election, choose 10,000 citizens at random, and then those citizens, and only those, are permitted to vote, but only if they first complete a competence-building exercise.

Or, an epistocracy might govern through what I call a "simulated oracle." In this system, every citizen may vote and express his or her policy preferences through public polls. Citizens would not only be asked which candidates they support, but also which policies they support. When citizens vote, we would require them to take a test of basic political knowledge (such as which party controls Congress or what the unemployment rate is) and disclose their demographic information.

Having collected this information — who citizens are, what they want and what they know — any statistician then could calculate the public's "enlightened preferences," that is, what a demographically identical voting population would support if only it were better informed. An epistocracy might then instantiate the public's enlightened preferences rather than their actual, unenlightened preferences.

Don't confuse epistocracy with technocracy. In a technocracy — a system espoused by many progressives — small panels of expert bureaucrats engage in massive paternalistic social engineering. Technocracy is more about what the government does rather than who the government is.

One major question is what counts, and who decides what counts, as political competence or basic political knowledge. We don't want selfish parties rigging a political exam for their own benefit. One solution would be to use widely accepted existing tests, such as the American Citizenship Exam. Another, almost paradoxical sounding idea, is that we could allow the qualification exam itself to be chosen through a democratic process. The idea here is that voters might be competent to answer the easy question of what counts as a good voter, even if they are not competent to answer the hard questions about the economics of international trade or immigration.

Some would object that epistocracy is essentially inegalitarian. In an epistocracy, not everyone has the same voting power. But what's so wrong with that? Only some people have plumbing or hairdressing licenses because we accept that only some people are
qualified to fix pipes or cut hair. Perhaps only some people, rather than everyone 18 and over, are truly qualified to decide who will lead the most powerful country on earth.

Another obvious complaint is that in an epistocracy, some demographic groups would have more voting power than others because some demographic groups have more measurable political knowledge than others. In our society, advantaged people are more knowledgeable, and advantaged people are more likely to be old and white than young and brown. Epistocracy could therefore take us back to the bad old days when middle-aged white professionals had more sway at the ballot box than everyone else. But at least some versions of epistocracy — such as the enfranchisement lottery or simulated oracle — avoid this problem.

Any epistocratic system would face abuse. Epistocracy would work better in high-trust, low-corruption societies — such as New Zealand or Denmark — rather than low-trust, high-corruption societies, such as Russia or Venezuela. In the latter, whoever designed the voting requirements would be more likely to rig it in favor of certain outcomes, and citizens would be more likely to suspect unfairness, even if there were none. But that's also true of democracy.

The interesting question isn't which system is perfect, but which system would work best, warts and all.

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