Political Epistemology

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Tuesday 12-14 c.t., S5 (GWII)

Overview

Political epistemology is a subfield of epistemology, the philosophical theory of knowledge, belief, and justification. It is concerned with questions like the following:

- What does it mean to speak of truth in politics? Is there such a thing?
- Is democracy a reliable way to find the truth? If not, how can it be improved?
- Do voters know enough to be competent? If not, what follows?
- How should I react to the fact that other people disagree with me in politics?
- Are there experts in politics? If there are, should we defer to them? Should they be given greater importance?
- What is the problem with echo chambers? Are social media platforms echo chambers?

This course will provide an overview of these and other major themes and debates in political epistemology, with a focus on work in analytic philosophy over the last two decades.

The course is designed for an undergraduate level. No prior knowledge in philosophy is assumed, although acquaintance with social and political philosophy or epistemology is helpful.

Requirements

Regular attendance is expected and will be crucial to your learning success.

Requirements for 2 ECTS

Reading reflections. A reading reflection is a short (around 200 words) critical reaction to one of the assigned readings. It should not be a mere summary of the reading, but instead formulate questions, critique, or other insights which you think will help class discussion.

Reading reflections are due online two hours before seminar sessions. You need to write a total of eight reading reflections.

You might also contribute by writing a **session summary** (around 2 pages) of class discussion on a day of your choice. The

summary should not be a linear protocol of class discussion, but an organised description of the major themes, disagreements, and open questions that arose in class.

Session summaries will be made available online to all participants and are due five days after the session. A session summary counts as three reading reflections.

Requirements for 5 ECTS

In addition to the requirements for 2 ECTS, you will have to fulfil *one* of the following two requirements:

Presentation with short essay. Presentations will be short (10 minutes) and on an assigned topic. You will have to send in your slides or handout five days before the seminar session to receive feedback from me. In addition to your presentation, you will have to write a short essay (around 2,000 words). You can choose a question relating to any of the topics listed in the syllabus (including topics we do not tackle in class); you might also choose to expand on the topic of your presentation. Your essay should have a clearly framed question which you aim to independently and critically answer yourself using secondary literature. Only your written work will be graded.

Long essay. If you do not present, you will have to write a long essay/*Hausarbeit* (around 4,000 words). The same requirements apply as for the short essay. Specifics will be discussed in the course.

The deadline for submitting short and long essays is tbd.

Plan

The seminar plan might change during term, sometimes on short notice. If you have suggestions or ideas for topics, we can discuss them in class and modify the seminar plan accordingly.

29.04.	1	Truth in politics
06.05.	2	Epistemic democracy
13.05.	3	Epistemic democracy (cont.)
20.05.	4	Political ignorance
27.05.	5	Political ignorance (cont.)
03.06.	6	Political disagreement
10.06.		No course (Whit Tuesday)
17.06.	7	Political polarization
24.06.		No course (Wittgenstein Lectures)
01.07.	8	Expertise
08.07.	9	Deference
15.07.	10	Echo chambers
22.07.	11	Epistemic duties

General literature

Political epistemology within analytic philosophy is a new and quickly expanding field, although its questions are arguably old and go back as far as Plato. General, introductory literature on political epistemology—i.e., handbooks, introductions, overviews—is accordingly relatively sparse, although debates on particular issues can be big.

The forthcoming book by **Hannon and Woodard** looks promising; for students who wish to gain an overview of political epistemology in addition to what we cover in the seminar, this would be my recommendation. **Traldi**'s book takes a slightly different approach but should work as a useful complement to Hannon and Woodard; note that Traldi's book is available open access.

Edenberg, Elizabeth, and Michael Hannon, eds. 2021. *Political Epistemology*. Oxford University Press.

*Hannon, Michael, and Elise Woodard. 2025. *Political Epistemology: An Introduction*. Routledge.

Hannon, Michael, and Jeroen de Ridder, eds. 2021. *The Routledge Handbook of Political Epistemology*. Routledge.

Samaržija, Hana, and Quassim Cassam, eds. 2023. *The Epistemology of Democracy*. Routledge.

*Traldi, Oliver. 2024. *Political Beliefs: A Philosophical Introduction*. Routledge.

Topics

The following is a list of topics we will tackle in the seminar.

Highlighted readings (in blue background) are the **assigned readings** for each week. For these readings, you will have to write reading reflections (see above).

All other readings are optional, but will help you to find additional philosophical literature, especially if you plan to write an essay.

1. Truth in politics

We start with the basic question whether there is such a thing as truth in politics. One might have a non-cognitive account of politics, such that politics is only about expressing desires, preferences, or other mental states that cannot be assessed in terms of 'true' and 'false'. We will consider a defence of *cognitivism*, the view that politics is, at least partially, about beliefs that can be true or false.

Landemore, Hélène. 2012. *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many*. Princeton University Press. Chapter 8, 'Political Cognitivism: A Defense'.

Arendt, Hannah. 1977. 'Truth and Politics'. In *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. Penguin.

Zerilli, Linda. 2006. 'Truth and Politics'. *Theory & Event* 9 (4).

2. Epistemic democracy

What makes democracy valuable? This is a large question to which political philosophers have given many answers. We are interested in one particular account: democracy is valuable because it helps us find the truth. This indeed seems an intuitive idea: the openness and equality of democratic participation and debate seems to give democracy beneficial features. Beyond this basic idea, however, many questions arise: how do we define epistemic 'success'? What type of institutions do we need to guarantee democracy's epistemic success? Would a technocratic approach not be superior?

Landemore, Hélène. 2012. 'Democratic Reason: The Mechanisms of Collective Intelligence in Politics'. In *Collective Wisdom: Principles and Mechanisms*, edited by Hélène Landemore and Jon Elster, 251–89. Cambridge University Press.

Anderson, Elizabeth. 2006. 'The Epistemology of Democracy'. *Episteme* 3 (1): 8–22.

Estlund, David. 1993. 'Making Truth Safe for Democracy'. In *The Idea of Democracy*, edited by David Copp, Jean Hampton, and John E. Roemer, 71–100. Cambridge University Press.

Estlund, David. 2008. *Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Landemore, Hélène. 2012. *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many*. Princeton University Press.

Spiekermann, Kai, and Robert Goodin. 2018. *An Epistemic Theory of Democracy*. Oxford University Press.

Surowiecki, James. 2004. *The Wisdom of Crowds*. Doubleday.

3. Epistemic democracy (cont.)

We continue our debate from last week. This week is focussed, in particular, on philosophers who have aimed to criticise, modify, or expand epistemic defences of democracy.

Müller, Julian. 2018. 'Epistemic Democracy: Beyond Knowledge Exploitation'. *Philosophical Studies* 175 (5): 1267–88.

Ancell, Aaron. 2017. 'Democracy Isn't That Smart (but We Can Make It Smarter): On Landemore's Democratic Reason'. *Episteme* 14 (2): 161–75.

Brennan, Jason. 2014. 'How Smart Is Democracy? You Can't Answer That Question a Priori'. *Critical Review* 26 (1–2): 33–58.

Ingham, Sean. 2013. 'Disagreement and Epistemic Arguments for Democracy'. *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 12 (2): 136–55.

Schwartzberg, Melissa. 2015. 'Epistemic Democracy and Its Challenges'. *Annual Review of Political Science* 18 (1): 187–203.

4. Political ignorance

A major threat looms for any epistemic defence of democracy: the fact that the average voter seems to be ignorant of even basic facts of politics. This finding is supported by lots of empirical research: many voters seem to have opinions which seem ideologically incoherent, irrational, or unsupported by the evidence. In this session, we will outline the basics of the challenge of political ignorance and discuss the sceptical conclusions some authors have drawn.

Brennan, Jason. 2016. *Against Democracy*. Princeton University Press. Excerpts.

Achen, Christopher, and Larry Bartels. 2016. *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*. Princeton University Press.

Caplan, Bryan. 2008. *The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies*. New edition. Princeton University Press.

Downs, Anthony. 1957. *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. Harper and Row.

Somin, Ilya. 2013. Democracy and Political Ignorance: Why Smaller Government Is Smarter. Stanford University Press.

Somin, Ilya. 2014. 'Why Political Ignorance Undermines the Wisdom of the Many'. *Critical Review* 26 (1–2): 151–69.

5. Political ignorance (cont.)

We continue debate from the previous week. Even if we accept that the median voter is incompetent, this does not necessarily spell the end for an epistemic account of democracy, or for optimism about our ability to defend democracy's value. Some authors have argued that the empirical research is overstated, or that widespread competence is less troubling than it first seems.

Bagg, Samuel. 2018. 'The Power of the Multitude: Answering Epistemic Challenges to Democracy'. *American Political Science Review* 112 (4): 891–904.

Elliott, Kevin. 2020. 'Democracy's Pin Factory: Issue Specialization, the Division of Cognitive Labor, and Epistemic Performance'. *American Journal of Political Science* 64 (2): 385–97.

Brinkmann, Matthias. 2018. 'The Concept of Political Competence'. *Critical Review* 30 (3–4): 163–93.

Gibbons, Adam. 2023. 'Political Ignorance Is Both Rational and Radical'. *Synthese* 202 (3): 1–22.

Hannon, Michael. 2022. 'Are Knowledgeable Voters Better Voters?' *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 21 (1): 29–54.

Kaye, Simon. 2015. 'Democracy Despite Ignorance: Questioning the Veneration of Knowledge in Politics'. *Critical Review* 27 (3–4): 316–37.

Lepoutre, Maxime. 2023. 'Political Understanding'. *British Journal of Political Science* 53 (2): 346–65.

Lovett, Adam. 2020. 'Democratic Autonomy and the Shortcomings of Citizens'. *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 18 (4): 363–86.

Lupia, Arthur. 2016. Uninformed: Why People Know so Little about Politics and What We Can Do about It. Oxford University Press.

6. Political disagreement

One crucial fact about politics is that people constantly appear to disagree. Moreover, political disagreement seems to exist not only on the surface level—i.e., disagreements about specific empirical facts. Instead, disagreement seems to go all the way down: we disagree about the fundamental values that should guide politics. Disagreement raises issues of several types. First, there is an epistemic issue: should the disagreement of others lead me to reduce my own confidence in *my* beliefs? Second, there is a moral issue: is it wrong to treat others in ways they disagree with, at least if their disagreements are reasonable? Lastly, there are strategic and practical issues: how is politics possible in the face of deep disagreement? Are there ways to manage disagreement?

Peter, Fabienne. 2013. 'Epistemic Foundations of Political Liberalism'. *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 10 (5): 598–620.

Brinkmann, Matthias. 2024. *An Instrumentalist Theory of Political Legitimacy*. Oxford University Press. Chapter 10. 'Legitimacy without Public Justification'.

Enoch, David. 2017. 'Political Philosophy and Epistemology: The Case of Public Reason'. *Oxford Studies in Political Philosophy* 3: 132–65.

Gerlsbeck, Felix. 2018. 'What Is Democratic Reliability? Epistemic Theories of Democracy and the Problem of Reasonable Disagreement'. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 21 (2): 218–41.

Hallsson, Bjørn. 2019. 'The Epistemic Significance of Political Disagreement'. *Philosophical Studies* 176: 2187–2202.

Hallsson, Bjørn, and Klemens Kappel. 2018. 'Disagreement and the Division of Epistemic Labor'. *Synthese* 197 (7): 2823–47.

Valentini, Laura. 2012. 'Justice, Disagreement and Democracy'. *British Journal of Political Science* 43 (1): 1–23.

van Wietmarschen, Han. 2018. 'Reasonable Citizens and Epistemic Peers: A Skeptical Problem for Political Liberalism'. *Journal of Political Philosophy* 26 (4): 486–507.

7. Political polarization

It is a common observation that politics has become increasingly polarized. How, why, and to what degree this process happens are ultimately empirical questions. But some interesting philosophical questions arise in this context, especially with respect to the epistemic dimensions of polarization. Is polarization rational, or is it generally irrational? Should polarization reduce credence in our own beliefs? Should one aim to countersteer one's own partisanship, and if so, how?

Joshi, Hrishikesh. 2020. 'What Are the Chances You're Right about Everything? An Epistemic Challenge for Modern Partisanship'. *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 19 (1): 36–61.

Nguyen, Thi. 2021. 'Was It Polarization or Propaganda?' *Journal of Philosophical Research* 46: 173–91.

Benson, Jonathan. 2024. 'Democracy and the Epistemic Problems of Political Polarization'. *American Political Science Review* 118 (4): 1719–32.

Iyengar, Shanto, Gaurav Sood, and Yphtach Lelkes. 2012. 'Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization'. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76 (3): 405–31.

Klein, Ezra. 2020. *Why We're Polarized*. Simon & Schuster.

Mason, Lilliana. 2018. *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. University of Chicago Press.

Sunstein, Cass. 2002. 'The Law of Group Polarization'. *Journal of Political Philosophy* 10 (2): 175–95.

Talisse, Robert. 2019. *Overdoing Democracy: Why We Must Put Politics in Its Place*. Oxford University Press.

Westfall, Mason. 2024. 'Polarization Is Epistemically Innocuous'. *Synthese* 204 (3): 1–22.

8. Expertise

There are at least two important questions concerning expertise in politics. First, there are experts concerning specific technical, administrative, or scientific subject matters—e.g., infrastructure engineers, central bankers, and climate scientists. One question is how democracies can give appropriate weight to such subject-

area expertise while keeping democratic debate appropriately wide and inclusive. A second worry is whether there are also genuinely political experts—that is, experts concerning what we should collectively choose, or what it would be right to choose. There have been fundamental worries about whether experts of this type can even exist. We will discuss these and related issues in this session.

Anderson, Elizabeth. 2011. 'Democracy, Public Policy, and Lay Assessments of Scientific Testimony'. *Episteme* 8 (2): 144–64.

Brennan, Johnny. 2020. 'Can Novices Trust Themselves to Choose Trustworthy Experts? Reasons for (Reserved) Optimism'. *Social Epistemology* 34 (3): 227–40.
Goldman, Alvin. 2001. 'Experts: Which Ones Should You Trust?' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 63 (1): 85–110.
Holst, Cathrine, Anders Molander, and Johan Christensen. 2022. *Expertise, Policy-Making and Democracy*. Routledge.
Pamuk, Zeynep. 2021. *Politics and Expertise: How to Use Science in a Democratic Society*. Princeton University Press.
Tetlock, Philip. 2006. *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?* Princeton University Press.

9. Political deference

Deference means believing someone else merely because you trust their opinion; it is an alternative, then, to forming your own opinion. In ethics, it is often thought that not having your own moral beliefs is troublesome: it seems odd, for example, to decide to become a vegetarian merely because someone told you that you should. You should at least, it seems, know the reasons *why* one should be a vegetarian. A parallel question arises in politics. Do we need to always form our political opinions ourselves? Should we 'do our own research'? The question again breaks down into an epistemic and a moral one: is it epistemically bad to defer to others in politics? Is it morally bad?

Huemer, Michael. 2005. 'Is Critical Thinking Epistemically Responsible?' *Metaphilosophy* 36 (4): 522–31.
Rini, Regina. 2017. 'Fake News and Partisan Epistemology'. *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*. kiej.georgetown.edu/fake-news-partisan-epistemology.

Brinkmann, Matthias. 2022. 'In Defence of Non-Ideal Political Deference'. *Episteme* 19 (2): 264–85.
Hazlett, Allan. 2016. 'The Social Value of Non-Deferential Belief'. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 94 (1): 131–51.
Hills, Alison. 2013. 'Moral Testimony'. *Philosophy Compass* 8 (6): 552–59.
Howell, Robert. 2014. 'Google Morals, Virtue, and the Asymmetry of Deference'. *Noûs* 48 (3): 389–415.
van Wietmarschen, Han. 2018. 'Political Testimony'. *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 18 (1): 23–45.

10. Echo chambers

This session examines the nature of echo chambers and epistemic bubbles, focusing on how they shape political belief formation and discourse. We will consider, in particular, whether and how echo chambers pose an epistemic problem.

Nguyen, Thi. 2020. 'Cognitive Islands and Runaway Echo Chambers: Problems for Epistemic Dependence on Experts'. *Synthese* 197 (7): 2803–21.

Anderson, Elizabeth. 2021. 'Epistemic Bubbles and Authoritarian Politics'. In *Political Epistemology*, edited by Elizabeth Edenberg and Michael Hannon. Oxford University Press.

Fantl, Jeremy. 2021. 'Fake News vs. Echo Chambers'. *Social Epistemology* 35 (6): 645–59.

Lackey, Jennifer. 2021. 'Echo Chambers, Fake News, and Social Epistemology'. In *The Epistemology of Fake News*, edited by Sven Bernecker, Amy K. Flowerree, and Thomas Grundmann. Oxford University Press.

Ross Arguedas, Amy, Craig Robertson, Richard Fletcher, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen. 2022. 'Echo Chambers, Filter Bubbles, and Polarisation: A Literature Review'. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. doi.org/10.60625/RISJ-ETXJ-7K60.

11. Epistemic duties

In closing, we can ask whether we have any duties in our epistemic conduct in politics. Do we have a duty to inform ourselves? A duty to educate ourselves? Do we have a duty to not vote if we haven't informed ourselves? Do we have a duty to inform others? We will also go back over many of the other topics which have covered in the seminar.

Joshi, Hrishikesh. 2021. *Why It's OK to Speak Your Mind*. Routledge. Chapters 1 and 2.

Brennan, Jason. 2009. 'Polluting The Polls: When Citizens Should Not Vote'. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 87 (4): 535–49.

Corbalán, Inés, and Giulia Terzian. 2021. 'Our Epistemic Duties in Scenarios of Vaccine Mistrust'. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 29 (4): 613–40.

Klijnman, Carline. 2021. 'An Epistemic Case for Positive Voting Duties'. *Critical Review* 33 (1): 74–101.

Tsoi, Siwing. 2018. 'You Ought to Know Better: The Morality of Political Engagement'. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 21 (2): 329–39.

Worsnip, Alex. 2018. 'The Obligation to Diversify One's Sources: Against Epistemic Partisanship in the Consumption of News Media'. In *Media Ethics, Free Speech, and the Requirements of Democracy*, edited by Joe Saunders and Carl Fox, 240–64. Routledge.

Alternate topics

There is currently no plan to cover the following topics within the course. Students might still find them interesting as topics for essays or further reading. We might also decide during the term to swap some of these topics for those currently scheduled.

'Post-Truth' politics

Especially in the light of the rise of populism, there has been much debate about the rise of 'post-truth politics', characterised by a type of politician or political participant who is no longer interested in truth. Concerns about fake news and conspiracy theories are closely related to the idea of post-truth politics.

Cassam, Quassim. 2021. 'Bullshit, Post-Truth, and Propaganda'. In *Political Epistemology*, edited by Elizabeth Edenberg and Michael Hannon. Oxford University Press.

Friedman, Jeffrey. 2023. 'Post-Truth and the Epistemological Crisis'. *Critical Review* 35 (1–2): 1–21.

Hannon, Michael. 2023. 'The Politics of Post-Truth'. *Critical Review* 35 (1): 40–62.

MacMullen, Ian. 2020. 'Survey Article: What Is "Post-Factual" Politics?' *Journal of Political Philosophy* 28 (1): 97–116.

O'Connor, Cailin, and James Owen Weatherall. 2018. *The Misinformation Age: How False Beliefs Spread*. Yale University Press.

Social ignorance

Aside from the average voter being ignorant in some general sense, there is also a worry that we encounter a structural type of ignorance in societies which are structured along gendered and racialised lines.

Martín, Annette. 2021. 'What Is White Ignorance?' *Philosophical Quarterly* 71 (4): 864–85.

Medina, Jose. 2012. *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations*. Oxford University Press.

Mills, Charles. 2007. 'White Ignorance'. In *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, edited by Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, 11–38. SUNY Press.

Sullivan, Shannon, and Nancy Tuana. 2007. *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*. SUNY Press.

Paradoxes of aggregation

Democracy can also be analysed through the lens of social choice. This is a field at the intersection of philosophy, mathematics, and economics which focusses on the formal properties of different voting systems. One famous result in this field is Arrow's Impossibility Theorem, which some authors have interpreted to yield sceptical results concerning democratic voting. In this session, we will look at the problem of judgment aggregation.

Spiekermann, Kai, and Robert Goodin. 2018. *An Epistemic Theory of Democracy*. Oxford University Press.

List, Christian, and Robert Goodin. 2001. 'Epistemic Democracy: Generalizing the Condorcet Jury Theorem'. *Journal of Political Philosophy* 9 (3): 277–306.

List, Christian. 2011. 'The Logical Space of Democracy'. *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 39 (3): 262–97.

List, Christian. 2012. 'The Theory of Judgment Aggregation: An Introductory Review'. *Synthese* 187 (1): 179–207.

Riker, William. 1982. *Liberalism against Populism: A Confrontation between the Theory of Democracy and the Theory of Social Choice*. Freeman.

Deliberative democracy

Deliberative democrats emphasise *deliberation* as a crucial feature of democracy, in opposition to aggregative approaches common in social choice. There is a huge literature on deliberative democracy, and for a while the view was dominant in philosophy (and might still be in some parts of academic debate); Jürgen Habermas is perhaps one of its most prominent defenders.

Ackerman, Bruce, and James Fishkin. 2002. 'Deliberation Day'. *Journal of Political Philosophy* 10 (2): 129–52.

Aldrich, John, and Jane Mansbridge, eds. 2013. *Deliberative Systems: Deliberative Democracy at the Large Scale*. Cambridge University Press.

Cohen, Joshua. 1986. 'An Epistemic Conception of Democracy'. *Ethics* 97 (1): 26–38.

Geuss, Raymond. 2019. 'A Republic of Discussion'. *The Point*, June 18. thepointmag.com/politics/a-republic-of-discussion-habermas-at-ninety

Gutmann, Amy, and Dennis Thompson. 2004. *Why Deliberative Democracy?* Princeton University Press.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1998. *Faktizität und Geltung*. Suhrkamp. Chapters 7 & 8.

Hedden, Brian. 2017. 'Should Juries Deliberate?' *Social Epistemology* 31 (4): 368–86.

Sanders, Lynn. 1997. 'Against Deliberation'. *Political Theory* 25 (3): 347–76.

Even further topics

This seminar has construed the topic of political epistemology relatively narrowly; at any rate, we could only cover some of the topics within political epistemology. Students who are interested in further topics might also wish to look into the following debates:

- Epistemic injustice
- Fake news
- 'Bullshit'
- Propaganda
- Conspiracy theories
- Standpoint epistemology
- Feminist epistemology
- Public reason
- Social epistemology