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INTRODUCTION

Since its foundation, democracy has been widely criticized by its opponents for several reasons. The most cogent objection points out the unfairness of giving every person the same portion of power – through the vote – without consideration of other criteria such as political knowledge and competencies. As the average voter tends to be misinformed and not particularly knowledgeable about political matters, detractors of democracy claim that this system does not valorize the expertise of competent voters. On the contrary, in light of its majority principle, democracy implicitly advantages the ‘ignorant’ masses, which, in turn, play a crucial role in electing governments.

This assumption would appear to be confirmed by several historical events. Paradigmatically, when Athenians democratically declared war on Syracuse, Greek citizens were misinformed about the military power of the Sicilian polis, Thucydides reported (cf. Thucydides, 5th century BC/1954, section 6.1.1). Despite their success, the consequences of the war marked the decline of the Greek Polis (cf. Thucydides, 2009, p. 357). Looking beyond historical events that happened more than two millennia ago, studies concerning the more recent Brexit referendum suggest that a consistent number of voters trusted the misleading campaign of Brexiteers who, among other things, promised a weekly allocation of £350 million to the National Healthcare System (cf. Ball, 2017, p. 48).

In light of the foregoing, critics of democracy argue that the political ignorance of voters is potentially harmful. Consequently, other forms of government in which competent voters are valorized should be taken into account for the common good. Among several proposals, the epistocratic account formulated by Jason Brennan in 2016 is the most straightforward as it does not exclude the idea to limit the voting rights of incompetent people (cf. Brennan, 2016, p. 17). Once the impact of this voting body is reduced, Brennan argues that competent governments will be more likely to approve reasonable policies (cf. Brennan, 2016, pp. 200 – 205).

All things considered, the first research question of this master’s thesis intends to discuss the validity of the epistocratic tenets and ascertain whether epistocracy could be

considered as a possible improvement upon democracy, or if it would only turn out to be a modern variant of aristocracy.

This work is composed of four chapters. The first one shows how criticisms concerning the relationship between democracy and incompetence (of voters) have always been present in philosophical debate. In particular, the ideas of Plato, Tocqueville, Mill and Brennan will be sketched. At this stage, what is important to note is that while Plato conceived of a political system ruled by philosopher-kings and warned against the ignorance of the masses, Tocqueville and Mill were sincere supporters of democracy, although aware of its flaws. Identifying Brennan's ideological position is more complex because of his *instrumentalist* (i.e., consequentialist) approach; meaning, although he is aware that democracy has demonstrated itself to be the lesser evil among forms of government, Brennan endorses the implementation of epistocracy as it may perform better than democracy by virtue of the fact that this system valorizes competent voters.

Given that some eminent philosophers have argued that the average voter tends to be incompetent and even too irrational to make important political decisions, the second chapter analyzes experiments, studies, and surveys to verify this assumption. In particular, the first subchapter will take into account the outcomes of several surveys testing the political knowledge of voters. The second section will focus on voters' behavior by comparing different experiments and studies in this field. Finally, the last subchapter will take into account the Brexit referendum to show how voters' misinformation played a crucial role in determining the Leave's victory.

The third chapter is devoted to the analysis of the epistocratic account. In particular, the first section aims to summarize the conceptual frameworks on which epistocracy is based; the second subchapter analyzes the admissibility of the truth-tenet, which argues that there are political truths with regard to some political subjects (cf. Brennan, 2016, p. 17). The third section focuses on the knowledge tenet that claims some people are more aware of these truths than others (cf. Brennan, 2016, p. 17). The last subchapter focuses on the anti-authority tenet, according to which it is legitimate to limit the voting rights of incompetent people (cf. Brennan, 2016, p. 17).

After having analyzed the epistocratic principles, the fourth (and final) chapter focuses on the field of didactics and seeks to answer the second research question of this

thesis, namely how the issue of epistocracy could be taught in ethics classes at Austrian schools. Specifically, the first subchapter will focus on preliminary considerations concerning the goals, methodologies, and topics employed by the national ethics curriculum of Austria. The second subchapter will focus on the simulation of two ethics lessons designed for AHS fifth-year pupils.

1. DEMOCRACY AND (IN)COMPETENCE: A HISTORICAL SKETCH

When some citizens are morally unreasonable, ignorant, or incompetent about politics, this justifies not permitting them to exercise political authority over others. It justifies either forbidding them from holding power or reducing the power they have in order to protect innocent people from their incompetence. (Brennan, 2016, p. 17)

1.1. *Plato: Never Trust Democracy*

The question of whether democracy may represent the best form of state is a matter that has inflamed philosophical debate since ancient Greece. As this dispute encompasses a wide-ranging spectrum of arguments, the present chapter will only take into account one specific objection that is often raised against democracy, namely the equal distribution of political power among voters regardless of their knowledge and competencies.

According to critics, the adoption of such a strong egalitarian framework may jeopardize the quality of political decision-making processes. In fact, democratic institutions need the consensus of the majority of the people to legislate, but the majority – as it will be shown in chapter II – are not knowledgeable and competent enough to make sound political decisions. Consequently, voters tend to opt for candidates with demagogical ideas who, in the end, could pose a threat to democracy itself.

Before bringing up the main thesis of Plato, it seems crucial to underline that the notion of democracy has deeply changed over time: in fact, the democratic system adopted in Athens and the modern notion of liberal democracy have very little in common. As a matter of fact, the main differences are evident by comparing the notion of ‘citizen’ and the role played by the latter in influencing political decisions. From this point

of view, it is worth mentioning that Athens was a direct democracy although only Athenian male citizens were actively involved in making political decisions; on the other hand, liberal democracies are more inclusive, but the power of citizens is delegated to representatives. All things considered, the word democracy is still useful to describe each system based on the idea that citizens should rule (cf. Ferrari, 2008, p. 93).

Detractors of democracy were not uncommon in ancient Greece. For instance, Pseudo-Xenophon in *Constitution of the Athenians* – a short treatise written in the 5th century BC – implacably pointed out that:

in every land the best element is opposed to democracy. Among the best elements there is very little license and injustice, very great discrimination as to what is worthy, while among the commons there is very great ignorance, disorderliness and rascality; for poverty tends(?) to lead them to what is disgraceful, as does lack of education and the ignorance which befalls some men as a result of lack of means. (Pseudo-Xenophon, 443-406 BC/1900, 1.5.)

This short extract shows a strongly aristocratic standpoint, according to which the masses are ignorant and inevitably opposed to the few good people who would instead rule with competence and justice.

The comedy writer Aristophanes was an ardent detractor of democracy, and his skepticism was staged in the work *The Knights*, in which two servants – the sausage seller Agoracritus and Paphlagonian – tried to obtain the approval of Demos by adulating him (cf. Aristophanes, 424 BC/1981, vv. 769-785). The play has a strong symbolic characterization: Demos personifies the Athenian citizenry, Paphlagonian represents the democrat Cleon, while the sausage seller, who triumphs against his rival, represents a demagogue (cf. Ferrari, 2008, p. 113). This comedy underlines the main fragility of democracy, namely the risk of being ruled by incompetent people who were able to get their position just by taking advantage of voters' ignorance (cf. Ferrari, 2008, p. 114).

Introducing Plato, it is worth mentioning a passage contained in *Gorgias*, in which Callicles warns Socrates that he should please the people instead of trying to improve them with maieutic. Otherwise, Socrates would risk a process that could put his own life at risk (cf. Plato, 4th century BC/2004, 521c). Here, Socrates admits to being aware of this danger and claims: "I shall be judged like a doctor brought before a jury of children with a cook as prosecutor." (Plato, 4th century BC/2004, 521e) The point raised by Socrates is

that those children (who symbolize the citizens of a democracy) are incapable of understanding that a doctor would like to help them with a bitter medicine; thus, they will prefer the cook because he is willing to spoil them (cf. Plato, 4th century BC/2004, 521e). In other words, Plato remarks that, as ordinary citizens are unable to recognize the nature of the common good, they should be prevented from becoming the ruling class (cf. Sørensen, 2016, p. 24). If not the people, it must be understood who should rule according to the philosopher.

The most eloquent answer to this question is given in the sixth book of the *Republic*, in which Plato explains that only expert people should be legislators. While debating with Adeimantus, Plato expresses his view by adopting a metaphor: he pictures a fleet led by an experienced and wise captain whose power is threatened by the arrogance of his incompetent sailors; although they do not have any foundational knowledge of what is needed to be a captain (cf. Plato, 4th century BC/2013, 488c-d), they keep underestimating the qualities of their captain by labeling him to be only a “prater, a star-gazer, a good-for-nothing.” (Plato, 4th century BC/2013, 489a) The good captain whom Plato is referring to is the philosopher, who is marginalized and ridiculed by society despite his impressive knowledge and wisdom.

Hence, the philosophers should lead the polis. Plato infers that they know the intimate nature of things since they are in search of the truth. Thus, they tend not to be deceived by the sensible world, nor do they intend to cheat or lie to people (cf. Plato, 4th century BC/2013, 485c). Moreover, as philosophers tend to focus on discovering truths, they tend to ignore pleasures of the flesh, which make them self-controlled (cf. 4th century BC/2013, 1997, 485d). This kind of self-control not only refers to the sexual sphere but extends to every aspect connected with a luxurious lifestyle, which also includes the spasmodic seeking of profit and power (cf. Vegetti, 2003, p. 41).

Accordingly, Callipolis is a city ruled by the philosophers, by those who have knowledge and competence and whose souls are rational and not corrupted by emotions and pleasures of the flesh (cf. Ferrari, 2008, p. 39). According to Plato, a *noocracy*, namely an aristocracy of the wise, is the best form of government; other forms of state only represent degenerations of it.

Plato admits that every phenomenon on earth is destined to mutate and become corrupted (cf. Plato, 1997, 546a). The first and more acceptable form of degenerated state is timocracy, which some commentators identify with the old Spartan constitution (cf. Rosen, 2005, p. 306). A timocratic system is a society founded on honor, whose rulers are characterized by their military prowess, ambition, and lack of eloquence (cf. Plato, 4th century BC/2013, 548c, 548e, 549a). Given their concupiscent nature, they tend to be corrupted by power and money (cf. Arruzza, 2018, p. 116).

The second type of degeneration is oligarchy, in which rulers are determined by census. While timocratic society, albeit degenerate, was based on the meritocracy of honor, an oligarchy does not recognize any meritocracy since only the wealthiest class rules, no matter how competent, irrepressible, and knowledgeable the members of this class are (cf. Plato, 4th century BC/2013, 551a, 551c). As imaginable, an oligarchic society poses the risk of causing deep class rifts that, in the end, could lead to a revolution of the masses. When the masses assume power, democracy arises.

In a democracy, Plato argues, freedom and egalitarianism pave the way for an anarchic society, in which everyone does whatever they want (cf. Plato, 4th century BC/2013, 557b, 557e, 558a-b). The chaos generated can only be opposed by tyranny, a system ruled by a single person with the initial consensus of the people.

To sum up, Plato argues that the only form of state that combines knowledge, competence, and good governance is an aristocracy ruled by wise people. Before concluding this section, I would like to point out that the Platonic utopia does not only describe who should rule, but it comprehensively covers every aspect of a citizen's life in the polis. For instance, the ideal Platonic state envisaged the communion of women and goods among other things (cf. Vegetti, 2003, p. 35), and a strict state education in order to prepare citizens to become producers, warriors, or philosopher-kings in accordance with the natural dispositions of their souls (cf. Vegetti, 2003, p. 35).

Such a project, far from being ideal, led Karl Popper to express his dismay at the success of the ideas contained in the *Republic*. The Austrian-British philosopher in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) claimed:

my opinion that he was the greatest of all philosophers has not changed. Even his moral and political philosophy is, as an intellectual achievement, without parallel, though I find it morally repulsive, and indeed horrifying. (Popper, 2013, p. 211)

It might seem reasonable to assume that Plato's contempt for democracy was fomented by the agitated events following the subversion of the Thirty Tyrants regime, as well as the restoration of democracy in Athens that, ultimately, condemned his mentor Socrates to death (cf. Russell, 2004, pp. 120, 137). Additionally, it can also be argued that his complex and detailed utopia aimed at designing a system that could guarantee political stability, which was largely absent during his lifetime and probably caused resentment toward democracy (cf. Arruzza, 2018, p. 119).

In any case, the question of who should rule is, according to Popper, misleading, and it would make more sense to examine the following issue: "how can we so organize political institutions that bad or incompetent rulers can be prevented from doing too much damage?" (Popper, 2013, p. 115) Centuries later, John Stuart Mill – perhaps inspired by a similar question – designed a new political system that attempted to combine democratic participation and epistocratic tools.

1.2. Tocqueville and Mill: Against the Tyranny of Majority (and their Mediocrity)

In the 19th century, the illuminist principles advocated by the French Revolution had undoubtedly left their mark as a large portion of intellectuals began to consider the democratic system to be the best form of state a nation could aspire to (cf. Russell, 2004, p. 773). However, it would be incorrect to infer that philosophers blindly and enthusiastically elevated democracy as the panacea against any form of aristocratic obscurantism. Neither should we maintain that – at that time – there was unanimity on considering egalitarianism as the embedded conceptual framework of democratic systems (cf. Caporali, 2006, p. 141). As it will be shown, two influential democratic sympathizers like Alexis De Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill expressed reasonable concerns with regard to some aspects linked to democracy: the risk of morphing into a *tyranny of the majority* and the peril of a government strongly influenced by the *mediocrity of the common people*.

In *Democracy in America* (1840), Tocqueville provides a detailed analysis of the constitutional system of the United States. His interest is justified by the successes in terms of wealth and equality in America that were credited to the nation's introduction of democracy (cf. Tocqueville, 1840/2010, p. 10). Nevertheless, the French philosopher expressed concern over the intrinsic and overpowering domain of the majority, the power of which might cause tragic and sorrowful consequences (cf. Tocqueville, 1840/2010, p. 410). As Tocqueville states:

when a man or a party suffers from an injustice in the United States, to whom do you want them to appeal? To public opinion? That is what forms the majority. To the legislative body? It represents the majority and blindly obeys it. To the executive power? It is named by the majority and serves it as a passive instrument. To the police? The police are nothing other than the majority under arms. To the jury? The jury is the majority vested with the right to deliver judgments. The judges themselves, in certain states, are elected by the majority. (Tocqueville, 1840/2010, p. 414)

In a nutshell, the author argues that checks-and-balances are particularly fragile in a democracy because the majority influences every sphere of political life, including those institutions that are impartial in theory. Tocqueville's concerns not only regard the political power exerted by an invincible majority against an undefended minority (cf. Tocqueville, 1968, p. 297), but also the consequences in terms of freedom of thought: the power of the majority gains its legitimacy tautologically from its support of the people; consequently, those who disagree with the will of the masses tend to fall silent in order not to be marginalized further (cf. Tocqueville, 1840/2010, pp. 418-419).

It might be useful to emphasize that, despite his grounded fears, Tocqueville was one of the most firm advocates of the democratic system. In fact, in the conclusion of his treatise, he asserts that people should be aware of its flaws and stay vigilant instead of being stuck in a passive and unproductive fear of democracy (cf. Tocqueville, 1840/2010, pp. 1196-1198), keeping in mind that no system is perfect per se, and that democracy has shown indisputable strengths.

John Stuart Mill was unquestionably inspired by the ideas discussed in *Democracy in America*. In his *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861), Tocqueville is occasionally cited and there are many passages in which Mill agrees with the thesis of the French author. Notwithstanding, a more attentive reading reveals a crucial difference be-

tween the two philosophers: while Tocqueville's concerns primarily focused on the *numerical power* of majority (namely, majority is stronger than minority), Mill shifted his concerns to the *qualitative nature of the majority*, which tends to be mediocre and likely unfit to make important decisions (cf. Mill, 1861/2004, p. 116).

Hence, Mill is – like Tocqueville – suspicious of the potentially unlimited power of the *majority* since it possesses the means to trample over any minority. When Mill refers to the minority, he refers to the small group of educated, capable, competent people opposed to the majority, namely the incompetent masses (cf. Mill, 1861/2004, p. 102). The philosopher polemically disputes:

the natural tendency of representative government, as of modern civilisation, is towards collective mediocrity: [...] their effect is to place the principal power in the hands of classes more and more below the highest level of instruction in the community. But though the superior intellects and characters will necessarily be outnumbered, it makes a great difference whether or not they are heard. (Mill, 1861/2004, p. 102)

In view of this, the British philosopher criticizes a voting system in which every person – no matter how acculturated or competent he or she is – expresses one vote. Despite this vision, it must be underlined that Mill is a stalwart democrat, and he opposes any form of restricted suffrage by arguing that every citizen has the inviolable right to express their political (dis)agreement through the exercise of vote (cf. Mill, 1861/2004, p. 108-109). His determined standpoint in favor of the enfranchisement of all adults, regardless of gender or ethnicity is also remarkable (cf. Mill, 1861/2004, p. 122). For the record, the only exception he makes involves people with little to no income, as Mill considers it unfair that people with no money should decide how and how much the incomes of other citizens are used (cf. Miller, 2015, p. 401).

All in all, the British philosopher argued that democracy is the best form of state, but there are some adjustments needed to make it fairer and more efficient (cf. Mulligan, 2018, 291). To do this, the liberal philosopher proposed a plural voting system, in which the vote of educated people counts more than the vote of the uneducated (cf. Mill, 1861/2004, p. 119). Paradigmatically, the vote of a post-graduate might count for two votes while an educated voter has only one vote.

It seems unequivocal that the conceptual framework behind this proposal is based on a vision of democracy in which the egalitarian principle exists, but in a strongly mitigated version. Mill's vision follows that every person has a voting right, but the weight of this depends on the fulfillment of certain criteria. In his project, plural voting should be given to the citizens that: (1) have demonstrated themselves to be particularly successful in their jobs (managers, entrepreneurs, civil servants, professors etc.) and (2) to those students who have achieved their degrees at acknowledged universities (cf. Mill, 1861/2004, p. 117). However, the question on how to define success in one's job remains left by the author. In addition, he energetically rejects the idea of aprioristically giving plural voting to the wealthy classes because "accident has so much more to do than merit with enabling men to rise in the world." (cf. Mill, 1861/2004, p. 116)

The political philosopher David Estlund, who strenuously argues against any epistocratic form, recognizes that the great strength of the plural voting system is that no one is disenfranchised but, at the same time, minorities have the possibility to weigh more if they demonstrate the possession of relevant knowledge and competences (cf. Estlund, 2008, p. 210). I will analyze the advantages and flaws of plural voting in the third chapter. For the time being, it is sufficient to say that Mill supports the plural voting system so that competent and knowledgeable people might play a more decisive role by voting. As Mill states:

if, with equal virtue, one is superior to the other in knowledge and intelligence—or if, with equal intelligence, one excels the other in virtue—the opinion, the judgment, of the higher moral or intellectual being is worth more than that of the inferior. (Mill, 1861/2004, p. 114)

In conclusion, plural voting stands as a tool by which the minority may oppose the tyranny of the majority more vigorously by giving more weight to those people with recognized knowledge, skills, and merit without depriving anyone of their right to vote (Mulligan, 2018, pp. 287-289). Considering the foregoing, it is reasonable to claim that Mill was the first philosopher of modernity that outlined the implementation of epistocratic tools in democracy.

1.3. Brennan: *Hobbits, Hooligans, and Vulcans*

As Brennan reports in the second edition of *Against Democracy*, he gave the publisher the final version of his book in 2016, just a couple of months before two rather important and unexpected political events happened (cf. Brennan, 2018, p. 33): in June, UK citizens voted for leaving the EU and, the following November, Donald Trump won the presidential election against Hillary Clinton. Many commentators have argued that such political events have been strongly influenced by the lack of knowledge of electors and by the massive circulation of fake news (cf. Ball, 2017, p. 2). In this regard, a three-fold interpretation could be adopted: either we reckon that voters are responsible for their own ignorance, or we assume that they are victims manipulated by a stronger misinformation system, or both options are true. In his work, Brennan clearly supports the first hypothesis, as the title of one of his chapters lets us assume: “irrational, ignorant, misinformed nationalists.” (Brennan, 2016, p. 23) *De facto*, the amount of empirical evidence and studies presented by Brennan with regard to voter ignorance is indeed imposing and, objectively, difficult to dispute.

The next chapter will focus on the so-called ‘ignorance of electors’ by analyzing studies and the impact of misinformed voters in the Brexit campaign. In this subchapter, the arguments proposed by Jason Brennan in favor of an epistocratic system will be addressed.

First of all, it must be made clear that Brennan adopts an ‘instrumentalist’ approach¹. According to this methodology, any argument for or against democracy must not be based on deontological reasons (i.e., democracy has value in itself because of the idea of equality it expresses), but on the basis of the outcomes it brings (cf. Brennan, 2016, p. 11). The argumentative style of Brennan is straightforward, sharp, even harsh sometimes. For instance, the author argues that choosing between democracy and epistocracy can be compared to the choice of the best pig in a beauty contest: both are imperfect, so one must choose the less ugly pig, which in this case means opting for the better functioning system (cf. Brennan, 2016, p. 207). Before delving into the epistocratic proposal, I will focus on some arguments made against the democratic system.

¹ Brennan adopts the term ‘instrumentalist’ in reference to consequentialist theory.

Brennan argues that voters are radically ignorant, and this may pose a threat for democracy itself. Paradigmatically, in a survey conducted in the US in 1964 – in the middle of the Cold War – only around 35% of citizens knew that the Soviet Union was not a member of NATO (cf. Brennan, 2016, p. 26); in 2011, 73% of respondents were not able to explain why the United States and the Soviet Union were rivals (cf. PR Newswire, 2011); in 2012, only 22% of non-voters – circa 45% of American electors – were not aware of the fact that Republicans had the majority in the House of Representatives (cf. Brennan, 2016, p. 27). What Brennan reports is that, despite an increasing number of educated people, citizens' political knowledge has remained more or less the same over the last forty years (cf. Brennan, 2016, p. 30). In front of the evidence of these and other studies, Brennan disputes the legitimacy of universal suffrage in favor of new forms of political participation in which possessing political knowledge constitutes a requirement for voting (cf. Brennan, 2016, p. 16).

Some critics may contend that challenging the right to universal suffrage is a rather controversial (if not dangerous) issue. Brennan counters this perspective by arguing that preventing incompetent people from voting might represent, instead, a tool for preserving the common good. As he claims:

if we, the electorate, are bad at politics, if we indulge fantasies and delusions, or ignore evidence, then people die. We fight unnecessary wars. We implement bad policies that perpetuate poverty. We overregulate drugs or underregulate carbon pollution. But the problem is that we, the electorate as a whole, don't make choices about whether to be informed or rational about politics. (Brennan, 2016, p. 24)

In other words, Brennan points out that the act of voting implies taking a position on a broad array of matters which strongly influence our daily lives, such as the national budget foreign policy, taxation and, ultimately, matters of life and death when it comes to environmental and war issues. In light of this, it seems reasonable to defend the adoption of epistocratic tools, such as basic knowledge tests, in order to allow competent and better-informed voters to have a stronger voice by influencing the political line. In his usual caustic and explicit way, Brennan polemically argues: "if they [the ignorant people] are mistaken, then we need to ask, just as we regulate emissions in order to control air

pollution, should we regulate voting in order to control voting pollution?” (Brennan, 2016, p. 53)

Brennan emphasizes that the typical voter is not stupid, but that most voters are not willing to take the time to adequately inform themselves in order to make better decisions. The philosopher calls this phenomenon, borrowing an expression mostly used in the field of economics, *rational ignorance*. This may sound like a paradox, but the concept indeed has its own intrinsic logic. Voters are generally uninformed – according to one study, 35% of American voters have a totally inadequate knowledge of politics (cf. Brennan, 2016, p. 25). Nevertheless, citizens deliberately and rationally decide to take no interest in politics; searching for the necessary information, interpreting it, and forming an opinion costs time – sometimes even money. Despite these time and mind consuming activities, voters are only called upon to express a vote, which, as statistics reveal, will rarely be decisive in the end (cf. Brennan, 2016, p. 35).

The philosopher distinguishes three categories of voters: the Hobbits, the Hooligans, and the Vulcans. The first group is characterized as being essentially uninterested in politics, lacking in basic social knowledge, and, when they try to get information, lacking the instruments to evaluate the reliability of sources (cf. Brennan, 2016, p. 4). Hooligans are antithetical to Hobbits: they indeed have a strong passion for politics, possess fixed worldviews, and an ability to provide complex justifications of their opinions. However, this kind of voter is strongly biased since they always believe themselves to be right and, generally, tend to reject sources and information which might compromise their system of beliefs (cf. Brennan, 2016, p. 5). Lastly, the Vulcans are rational voters whose approach to politics is non-ideological; they have impressive knowledge in the social sciences and tend to look for the reliability of sources before taking any position for or against something (cf. Brennan, 2016, p. 5).

Brennan admits that these categorizations are merely archetypical and only serve as models. Nonetheless, he asserts that most voters are a mix of Hobbits and Hooligans, while the perfect Vulcans do not exist since all citizens are – more or less – biased. However, in defiance of the non-existence of perfect Vulcans, it is possible to find better-

informed voters (cf. Brennan, 2016, pp. 5-6). In light of this, Brennan invites us to consider the adoption of an epistocratic system as a solution for limiting the possible harms done by Hobbits and Hooligans.

The American philosopher defines epistocracy as “the rule of the knowledgeable.” (Brennan, 2016, p. 14). Although several epistocratic models have been theorized, the basic principle behind any epistocracy consists of making voting rights dependent on the knowledge of the voter. A more detailed analysis about the conceptual framework of epistocracy has been made by one of its critics, the aforementioned David Estlund. According to Estlund, epistocracy relies on three tenets:

- (1) **Truth tenet:** There are correct answers to (at least some) political questions.
- (2) **Knowledge tenet:** Some citizens know more of these truths or are more reliable at determining these truths than others.
- (3) **Authority tenet:** When some citizens have greater knowledge or reliability, this justifies granting them political authority over those with lesser knowledge. (Estlund, 2008, p. 30)

Brennan agrees with the first two principles expressed, but he is aware of the pitfalls that the principle of authority conceals: the authority tenet could be refuted by the simple observation that being an expert is not a sufficient reason to argue that experts should rule (cf. Brennan, 2016, p. 17). Thus, Brennan decides to fall back on another principle, more congenial with his thesis: the ‘principle of anti-authority’, for which:

When some citizens are morally unreasonable, ignorant, or incompetent about politics, this justifies not permitting them to exercise political authority over others. It justifies either forbidding them from holding power or reducing the power they have in order to protect innocent people from their incompetence. (Brennan, 2016, p. 17)

This tenet makes the epistocratic conceptual framework more invulnerable since it does not postulate the necessity to be ruled by the experts but rather the right not to be ruled by incompetents (cf. Brennan, 2016, p. 17). However, in the third chapter it will be shown how problematic the implementation of this principle is.

One last aspect to mention before moving forward concerns the value that Brennan attributes to the concept of voting. Far from considering voting rights as inviolable, the epistocratic exponent claims that voting should be considered more as a driver’s license (cf. Brennan, 2016, p. 18). According to this parallelism, if some people are considered unable to drive because they are not good at it, then some potential electors would not be

allowed to vote unless they demonstrate themselves to have basic political knowledge. Brennan argues that in both cases – driving and voting – the security of citizens is at stake. A misinformed and ignorant voter might be as dangerous as a reckless driver; while the latter ignores the rules of the road, causing damage to other people, the former might jeopardize the life of all citizens by supporting reckless economic and environmental policies, as well as policies concerning democratic institutions.

Paradigmatically, while 97 percent of climate scientists argue that climate change has been strongly influenced by human activities (cf. NASA, 2017), a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center showed that less-educated people are statistically (much) less worried about climate change compared to educated people (cf. Pew Research Center, 2019).

Following Brennan's logic, we should admit that a high percentage of less-educated people may undermine all necessary efforts to tackle climate change since those voters could elect negationists or politicians who do not consider the adoption of policies to combat climate change a priority. Thus, this may constitute a concrete danger for both the people and the planet. In light of this, epistocrats stress the importance of having competent voters to decide on decisive and complex issues.

It is interesting to note that both Plato and Brennan, centuries apart, underline the importance of being competent by using similar metaphors which stress the ability to drive: Plato compares the ability to govern to the ability of a good captain to steer their ship, while Brennan compares the ability to vote wisely to a person's ability to pass a driving test. The next chapter will verify the empirical evidence supporting the epistocratic conviction, according to which voters tend to be incompetent and misinformed, by taking into account studies, surveys, and a practical case: the Brexit referendum.

2. THE REASONS BEHIND EPISTOCRACY: WHAT THE EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE ON VOTERS' BEHAVIOR AND KNOWLEDGE SAY

A relatively stable level of ignorance has persisted even in the face of massive increases in educational attainment and an unprecedented expansion in the quantity and quality of information available to the general public at little cost. (Somin, 2013, pp. 19-20)

2.1. *On the Disinformation of Voters*

After having addressed the reflections of Plato, Tocqueville, Mill and Brennan about the relationship between democracy and the (in)competence of the masses, one question to be answered is whether voters are so ignorant and incapable of making the right political decisions.

Retrospectively, the criticisms against the disarming ignorance of electors are as old as criticisms against democracy. Paradigmatically, the great ancient historian Thucydides blamed the Athenians for being unforgivably misinformed about Syracuse when they decided to declare war against the Sicilian polis during the Peloponnesian war in 415 BC. Thucydides indeed argued that the citizen-voters had clearly underestimated the size of the island and the military strength of one of the most important poleis of the ancient world (cf. Thucydides, 5th century BC/1954, section 6.1.1). Needless to say, the consequences of this conflict strongly contributed to the inevitable decline of Athens (cf. Somin, 2013, p. 206). Millenia later, modern democracies seem to face a similar order of problems. For instance, as I will argue in the next section, according to studies and research, it is not absurd to assume that the misinformation of British voters played a considerable role in influencing the outcome of the EU referendum in 2016.

All epistocratic accounts stress voters' lack of preparation as a crucial argument to stand out against democracy, or at least to counter the idea that the knowledge of voters

should be considered and counted equally. However, voters not only show a serious lack of knowledge in economic and social issues on average, but they tend to experience politics in a tribalist manner by supporting a party or ideology in a non-rational and partisan manner, research says.

This chapter is structured as follows: in this section, some studies that testify the inadequate knowledge of the average voter will be shown; in the second subchapter, some of the most well-known biases that affect political decision making and some considerations about the political tribalism of voters will be illustrated. The final subchapter will take into account how the disinformation campaign of Brexiteers might have influenced the opinion of voters on deciding to leave the European Union. The main aim of this chapter is to illustrate what empirical evidence has demonstrated in terms of voters' ignorance and voters' political tribalism. In conclusion, studies, experiments, and surveys seem to show that the archetypical voters designed by Brennan (Hobbits and Hooligans) are anything but unreal.

As mentioned in the last chapter, John Stuart Mill was concerned, among other issues, about the ignorance of the majority, but he also argued that if all citizens were allowed to be involved in politics, they would start to be more participative and better-informed about the most important political and economic issues (cf. Mill, 1861/2004 p. 111). With regard to the participation of voters, an inexorable increase of abstentions is affecting all western democracies (cf. Crouch, 2003, p. 4). Particularly interesting is the situation in the United States, where voter turnout has never surpassed 60 percent since 1968 (cf. the American Presidency Project, 2020), excluding the turbulent presidential elections in 2020.

Interestingly, while it is true that Americans have never been more educated than they are today, their political ignorance is more or less the same as it was forty years ago (cf. Brennan, 2016, p. 30). Other studies show that the level of political knowledge of voters is generally very low, although the wealthiest social groups demonstrate considerable political knowledge (cf. Althaus, 2003, pp. 11-12).

Ilya Somin, professor of law at George Mason University, analyzed several surveys conducted in the USA which tested the political knowledge of electors. At the end of the evaluation, he concluded that between 25 and 35 percent of American voters belong to

the statistical class of “know-nothings” (Somin, 2013, p. 35). By analyzing a few polls, it is possible to get a glimpse of the modest level of political knowledge among Americans. Furthermore, these studies suggest the level of disinformation is persistent in every single matter, from basic geopolitical notions and foreign policy to domestic policy, including economic issues and constitutional fundamentals.

As far as geopolitical notions are concerned, while the United States was still involved in the controversial ‘Global War on Terror’, a survey conducted in 2007 showed that only 32 percent of Americans knew that Sunnism is one of the two major branches of Islam (cf. Somin, 2013, p. 18). In 1986, during the Cold War, Mikhail Gorbachev became the new Soviet leader, a fact that around 60 percent of respondents were not aware of (cf. Somin, 2013, p. 19). Additionally, although the United Kingdom was a crucial military ally for the United States in the Afghan conflict, only 15% of Americans knew that David Cameron was the Prime Minister in 2010 (cf. Somin, 2013, p. 24). Moreover, according to a study conducted in 2011, only 40% of eligible American voters knew which countries the USA fought against in WWII (cf. Brennan, 2016, p. 25).

As far as economic knowledge is concerned, a survey conducted just before the 2010 midterm elections showed that 61 percent of Americans did not know that their economy had grown, and around 54 percent of respondents were not aware that the Obama stimulus bill also included tax cuts (cf. Somin, 2013, p. 22). This data is particularly relevant since the republican campaign blamed the Obama administration for being ineffective in getting the American economy back on track (cf. Wolf, 2017). In light of these studies, it seems reasonable to assume that at least a small percentage of electors voted with the conviction that Obama had increased taxes and did not do anything significant for the recovering economy.

In relation to domestic policy, only 37 percent of eligible voters were aware of the fact that crime had decreased and a sizeable amount of money had been allocated to welfare policies in the 1990s (cf. Brennan, 2016, p. 26). On the occasion of the 2000 presidential election, the democratic candidate Al Gore based his campaign on the sensibilization of environmental issues among other things. However, the majority of respondents in a survey did not know who, between George Bush and Al Gore, was more sympathetic to green economy initiatives (cf. Somin, 2013, p. 31). Even more surprising is that only

36% of eligible voters knew that Al Gore was more liberal than Bush (cf. Somin, 2013, p. 31).

Concerning constitutional fundamentals, a 2006 survey reported that only 42 percent of Americans were able to name the three branches of constitutional power (legislative, executive, judicial) (cf. Somin, 2013, p. 19). Generally speaking, Somin points out that:

three aspects of voter ignorance deserve particular attention. First, many voters are ignorant not just about specific policy issues but about the basic structure of government and how it operates. [...]

The second salient aspect of ignorance is that most voters lack an “ideological” view of politics capable of integrating multiple issues into a single analytical framework derived from a few basic principles; ordinary voters rarely exhibit the kind of ideological consistency in issue stances that are evident in surveys of political elites. [...]

Finally, and important, the level of political knowledge in the American electorate has increased only modestly, if at all, since the beginning of mass survey research in the late 1930s. A relatively stable level of ignorance has persisted even in the face of massive increases in educational attainment and an unprecedented expansion in the quantity and quality of information available to the general public at little cost. (Somin, 2013, pp. 19-20)

It could be argued that the situation has improved in recent years. In this regard, an interesting survey conducted by NPR IPSOS in December 2020 – right after the elections that set off the end of Trump’s presidency – showed that 37 percent of Americans believed that Donald Trump was defeated by a deep-state, whose members are “satan-worshipping pedophiles.” (IPSOS, 2020) Furthermore, only 47 percent of respondents argued that is incorrect to say that “satan-worshipping elites who run a child sex ring are trying to control our politics and media” (Spocchia, 2020), while 37 percent was not sure about the statement and 17 argued that it was definitely true (cf. Spocchia, 2020).

All these statistics and studies should not lead the reader to think that the plague of disinformation and political ignorance is only an American issue and that European citizens are immune to it. On the contrary, the section dedicated to Brexit aims to show that the misinformation of people about basic political facts is an alarming signal to take into account as well, especially at a time in which fake-news and conspiracy theories have become a danger to the stability of democracies. By way of example, Brexit sympathizers estimated that immigrants residing in the United Kingdom represented 20% of the population; nonetheless, the exact percentage was around 5% (cf. Brennan, 2018, p. 32).

The disinformation plague does not only infest the Anglo-Saxon world: as the Al-lensbach Institute reports, while 7% of Americans consider Bill Gates guilty of spreading the coronavirus in order to build a “new world order,” 5% percent of German and French people agreed with this statement. Hence, the results were not far below the American one (cf. Zitelmann, 2020).

Even more significant is a study conducted by IPSOS MORI in 2017. The market research company aimed to establish how much citizens’ perception of reality around the world was adherent to the facts. While Sweden, Norway, and Denmark ranked highest among nations with the strongest perception of reality, Italy placed twelfth among nations with the strongest misperception of reality, the worst position in the European Union. The fourteenth position was occupied by Japan, a nation with an established democracy and with the third-largest economy in the world in terms of nominal GDP (cf. World Bank, 2021) while France placed sixteenth (cf. IPSOS MORI, 2017, p. 39).

These statistics show the low level of voter knowledge and voters’ inability to perceive reality properly. If, as the advocates of epistocracy say, the right to vote should be earned by passing a test, it would not be unreasonable to think that the threshold of eligible electors would drop significantly, especially in some countries.

The right to vote is the means by which citizens try to give political direction to their democratic institutions. Given the important task they are called upon to perform, it seems legitimate to demand that voters should have at least a basic level of awareness about political matters. Otherwise, the quality of democratic institutions may be seriously undermined by the incompetence of electors who could support candidates or parties favorable toward demagogical policies.

2.2. *On Voters’ Behavior: Polarization, Biases, and Political Tribalism*

2.2.1. *On Polarization*

The aim of this section is to demonstrate how voters, far from approaching a political discussion with rationality and critical thinking, tend to adopt a tribalistic attitude, in which belonging is much more influential than judicious and logical analyses. In other words, borrowing Brennan’s terminology, if the previous section dealt with the question

of whether the average voter is a Hobbit (i.e., a person who tends to be misinformed and uninterested in politics), this subchapter shows how voters tend to be Hooligans.

A Hooligan is a rather polarized voter who is unwilling to change their political beliefs in spite of what facts suggest. As Brennan already observed, democratic systems tend to be polarizing and one of the most arduous challenges of democracy consists in not transforming citizens into *civic enemies* (cf. Brennan, 2016, p. 231). Democracy is indeed structured in elections, parties, lobbies, etc., and one of the reasons why people may find politics exciting is due to this mechanism through which, after the elections, there are winners and losers (cf. Brennan, 2016, p. 235).

It might be objected that this phenomenon is more mitigated in political systems in which there is no bipartisanship. Although this observation is true, it must be admitted that almost all western democracies stand on bipolarism; thus, the mechanisms remain quite similar, if not identical.

Polarization phenomena are nothing new. For instance, an interesting experiment was conducted in 1960s France: the sample was composed of people who shared a positive opinion about Charles de Gaulle and, at the same time, a negative view of United States foreign policy. These people were then asked to talk amongst each other about the French president and American foreign policy. What the experimenters noticed was that the political views of the sample became more extreme, and they tended to support their opinions with more conviction than they did before the discussion. Hence, a discussion among like-minded people further polarized their political outlook (cf. Talisse, 2021, p. 211).

A similar experiment was conducted in Colorado in 2005. The sample was divided into two groups on the basis of their political views. They were then asked to discuss with their group issues such as same-sex civil unions, aid for disadvantaged social groups, and global warming. Similar to the results of the French experiment conducted forty years earlier, people were more convinced of their opinions after the discussions (cf. Talisse, 2021, pp. 211-212). Tellingly, the results of these examples testify a double shift when people argue with like-minded groups about political issues: there is a shift in *confidence* (a person becomes more convinced about their opinion) and in *content* as people tendentially adopt more extreme positions after the discussion (cf. Talisse, 2021, p. 215).

In a context in which politics is inevitably structured in the ‘winners or losers’ logic, people tend to identify themselves with a specific party or ideology rather than think about the best policies or candidate, as the next experiment demonstrates. The psychologist Geoffrey Cohen asked his participants which welfare policy – between a generous one and a restrictive one – they preferred, without telling them which was the republican or democratic proposal. Generally, republicans opted for the more restrictive welfare policy while democrats chose the most generous one. In the second part of the experiment, they were told in advance who had proposed a particular policy. What emerged was that liberal voters almost aprioristically favored the proposal categorized as democratic; likewise, conservative voters always chose the republican proposal, without expressing any concerns about the content of the policy (cf. Chong in Brennan, 2016, p. 39). Interestingly, liberal and conservatives showed similar degrees of polarization by defending their party's policies regardless of their ideological consistency.

In another experiment, the participants were democratic and republican party supporters. They were asked to comment on the incoherence of important American politicians. Tellingly, republican sympathizers stigmatized the attitudes of democratic politicians while they defended the conservatives’. Likewise, democrats showed themselves to be inflexible against the incoherence of republican exponents but were way more empathetic to members of their own party (cf. Westen et al., 2006, p. 1947).

Finally, an interesting study conducted by Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler brought to light the backfire effect. This phenomenon consists of reinforcing one’s own political opinions even when the evidence of facts contradicts them (cf. McIntyre, 2018, p. 48). Specifically, party sympathizers were shown two fake newspaper articles with untrue information: one stated that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction while the second claimed that President Bush had imposed a total ban on stem cells (cf. McIntyre, 2018, p. 48). When participants were told that the reports were false and the factual evidence was shown to them, progressive supporters tended to accept the corrections while many conservatives denied the counterfactual evidence and defended their opinion even more forcefully than before (cf. McIntyre, 2018, p. 49). Interestingly, this experiment showed that Republican supporters are more affected by the backfire effect than Democrats.

2.2.2. *On Biases*

All these studies testify that political reasoning does not tend to reach objectivity through sources and facts; on the contrary, people lean towards information that may bolster their perception of reality. As Milton Lodge and Charles Taber reports: “the evidence is reliable in showing that people find it very difficult to escape the pull of their prior attitudes and beliefs, which guide the processing of new information in predictable and sometimes insidious ways.” (Lodge and Taber in Brennan, 2016, p. 37)

The reason why people tend to act in this way probably lies in what psychologists call ‘motivated reasoning.’ In a nutshell, our reasoning has not been developed for seeking truth (cf. Haidt, 2010) but for solving problems by means of logic. However, if some events or facts collide with our interpretation of reality, people tend to reshape the latter in order to have the impression of being right. To do this,

we try to arrive at beliefs that maximize good feelings and minimize bad feelings. We prefer to believe some things as opposed to others, and our brains tend to converge on the beliefs we prefer to have. (Brennan, 2016, p. 38)

Additionally, biases also play a major role in distorting our reality. For the purposes of this section, I will take into account the Dunning-Kruger bias and the confirmation bias. The former consists in the tendency of people to massively overestimate their actual intelligence, knowledge, and competence about a topic. In 1999, David Dunning and Justin Kruger asked forty-five university students to carry out a complex logic test, and then to evaluate if their performance was above average or not. Interestingly, the highest misperception between expected performance and real achievement was made by the participants who performed the worst. As McIntyre reports: “although these individuals scored at the 12th percentile on average, they nevertheless believed that their general logical ability fell at the 68th percentile.” (McIntyre, 2018, p. 53) In other words, incompetent people tend to underestimate the skills needed to properly understand a specific issue and overestimate their abilities (cf. Dunning, Kruger, 1999, p. 1121).

With regard to the confirmation bias, Dan Kahan shows its influence in an interesting experiment: in the first phase, the sample is asked to logically reason around a neutral topic (e.g., how to combat the flu). At this stage, both left- and right-wing voters could come to the right answer by logically analyzing the data. In the second phase, they were

asked about political topics (including gun regulation). Contrary to the impartiality shown during the first phase, here, the vast majority of respondents used the data provided to them to support their pre-existing beliefs, rather than inquiring their convictions in light of the new data (cf. Kahan in Brennan, 2016, p. 43-44).

The impact of confirmation bias has increased with the emergence of social media since the algorithms of Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms tend to show only what is pertinent with the interests of the user (cf. Edenberg, 2021, p. 275). As a result, despite the infinite possibilities of meeting and confronting new people about different ideas thanks to the internet, people more often live in a bubble because social media presents content that nourishes the confirmation bias instead of offering new food for thought (cf. McIntyre, 2018, pp. 61-62). As Lynches points out,

social media fuels tribal arrogance by reinforcing shared convictions through highly charged emotional content. All of this make us vulnerable to exploitation of our tribal identities to fuel hate and divisions within our democracy, rather than building common ground. (Lynches, 2021, p. 264)

2.2.3. *On Political Tribalism*

Being influenced by biases does not represent a serious problem per se. After all, these phenomena belong to human nature. However, it would be a mistake to underestimate what research brought to light regarding the impact of political tribalism. In fact, this behavior not only implies that a voter might be more sympathetic toward their favorite party while becoming more intransigent toward opposing ones. Political tribalism may imply acritical support for one party/candidate regardless of their actions, programs, or scandals. In other words, political preference transcends rational reasons, and is often inspired by an irrational and emotional engagement.

With regard to this, many examples could be mentioned. In the 2018 Italian general elections, the Five Star Movement achieved an impressive 33 percent of votes and attained first place. However, their political program was not very specific; paradigmatically, the party did not mention where they would have found the necessary hedges for realizing their program. A detailed analysis conducted by Roberto Perotti, professor at the University of Bocconi, showed that if all their electoral promises were realized and approved through policy, the economic plan of the Five Star Movement would have

caused a consistent deficit, around 63 billion euros a year (cf. Perotti, 2018). In other words, many voters overwhelmingly chose a party that had not presented a credible and sustainable economic program.

Less than a year later, on occasion of the 2019 European Parliament elections, the Five Star Movement halved their consensus while the League made incredible gains, achieving roughly 35 percent of the vote. The interesting fact was that the League did not present any political program, but just a short manifesto written together with the other European populist parties (cf. *Il Post*, 2019). Additionally, in the same period, the League was in the middle of a scandal since the party had illegally received money from the Russian government, according to the American website *Buzzfeed News* and the Italian magazine *L'Espresso* (Serughetti in McIntyre, 2019, p. VIII). To sum up, a consistent share of the electorate voted for a party that did not present any political program and was involved in an international scandal.

It would be interesting to analyze on which basis the electorate decided to support those parties. Under an epistocratic and extremely provocative point of view, such phenomena are possible as voters are “ignorant, irrational, misinformed nationalists” (Brennan, 2016 p. 23) who lack in political and economic knowledge, are not informed about the latest political facts, and, lastly, do not care much if their party is involved in corruption scandals.

In other words, in addition to the fact that average voters tend not to have sufficient knowledge in political and economic matters, they also show an emotional approach to politics rather than a rational one. This is the reason why some Hooligans – as Brennan would call them – strenuously support their candidates or their parties just because they feel attached to them. From this point of view, it does not matter how detailed a political program is, nor does it matter how well a party has governed, nor is it relevant how moral, coherent, and competent a candidate is.

As pointed out at the beginning of this section, democracies inevitably tend to polarize voters since elections become an occasion to show opposing views, sharp clashes, electoral promises, etc. As a result, this foments the logic of ‘us against them.’

While those dynamics are normal and not so grievous per se, they may become a serious problem for society if the democratic system already faces a crucial and difficult

phase. In this case, the ‘civic enemies’ mentioned by Brennan might become evil enemies since every election is not only about the approval of some policies instead of others, but it becomes a clash between different ways of perceiving truth and reality, as the extreme case of the Capitol Hill attack testifies.

Thus, in light of the foregoing and applying the anti-authority tenet pointed out by Brennan, it might sound reasonable to argue that, since voters have proved both in elections and in studies to be incompetent, highly biased, and tribalist, they should be disenfranchised from voting. However, in the next chapter it will be shown that every person – no matter how knowledgeable and competent – is affected by biases and political tribalism.

2.3. *The Brexit Referendum: Between Slogans and Misinformation of Voters*

It might be objected that many studies which have been analyzed so far were conducted in the United States, where the educational level of average voters might be different from the European one. In this section, a short analysis of the EU membership referendum held in the United Kingdom, that saw Brexiteers win on the morning of the 24th of June 2016, will be conducted. This (partially) unexpected upshot has decreed the first – and so far, only – withdrawal of a nation from the European Union, which became effective on the 1st of February 2020. As I will argue, the electoral campaign was likely influenced by deceptive slogans, which voters seem to have believed, at least in part.

At the beginning of the electoral campaign, the Remainers, who wished for the United Kingdom to remain in the European Union, were solidly ahead in the polls. However, from the end of May until voting day, polls showed a possible but still improbable head-to-head between Remainers and Brexiteers (cf. Ball, 2017, p. 43). In order to understand what happened, electoral promises must be considered. The keyword of the Remain campaign was “economic stability” (Ball, 2017, p. 45), and this stance guaranteed the Remain supporters to be upheld by a consistent number of experts in economic and political issues all over Europe (cf. Ball, 2017, pp. 44-45). On the other side, Brexiteers knew that ‘immigration’ and ‘money’ were the decisive issues of the referendum (cf. Ball,

2017, p. 48). Consequently, the Leave campaign proposed two improbable but effective slogans: (1) if Leave won, then the weekly £350 million allocated to the EU would be used to fund the National Healthcare System (cf. Ball, 2017, p. 48); (2) if Remain won, then the UK would be forced to take in millions of refugees as Turkey would soon join the EU (cf. Ball, 2017, p. 53). Both slogans were highly deceptive.

As far as the £350 million is concerned, the figure was derived from a rough calculation: since the UK was expected to send the EU around £18 billion a year, Brexit campaigners divided the amount by 52, the number of weeks in a year, equaling £350 million a week. This calculation is misleading for two reasons: first of all, the calculated annual amount was gross, not net; secondly, the figure does not count all the economic advantages that the UK would lose by leaving the EU (cf. Ball, 2017, p. 50). As a result, “the UK’s statistical authority asked the campaign not to use the £350 million slogan – a rare intervention during election periods – warning the figures were ‘potentially misleading.’” (cf. Ball, 2017, p. 51) More directly, Quassim Cassam (2021, p. 57) defined this slogan as a “strategic bullshit.” One day after the referendum, Nigel Farage admitted that this slogan was only propaganda and there was no way to allocate the £350 million to the NHS (cf. Quinn, 2016).

The other pièce de résistance of the Brexit campaign was its approach toward immigration. With regard to this, the main claim was that Turkey was going to join the EU and that this would have led to a massive migratory wave to the UK. A famous poster of the Brexiteers claimed “Turkey (population 76 million) is joining the EU” (cf. Cassam, 2021, p. 57), but the most eloquent image of the electoral campaign is

a picture of a huge queue of people – coincidentally or otherwise, mostly made up of non-white people – headlined ‘BREAKING POINT – the EU has failed us all’, with the strapline ‘We must break free of the EU and take back control’. The poster was widely condemned as offensive and even compared to some used in Nazi propaganda, which had similarly pictured large flows of refugees against an almost identical background. The image was given no context in the Leave. EU poster but was in reality a picture of refugees on the Croatia/Slovenia border. The UK’s obligations on refugees are unrelated to its EU membership, and the UK had already opted out of EU refugee quota schemes. (Ball, 2017, p. 56)

This was not the only highly controversial message spread by Brexiteers. For instance, the *Daily Express* – a pro-Leave tabloid – headlined “12M Turks say they’ll come

to UK,” underling that many British citizens would have lost their job because of migration (cf. Ball, 2017, p. 54). Needless to say, Turkey has not even been close to joining the EU; in order to join the EU, a state must meet strict criteria and, in 2016, Turkey still had over thirty requisites to satisfy (cf. Ball, 2017, p. 53). In the end, Leave won by 52 percent. Dominic Cummings, Leave’s campaign director, argued that Brexit would have never won without using exaggerated anti-immigration propaganda (cf. Ball, 2017, p. 51).

Now, the question is whether voters were aware of the deceptive campaign carried out by Leavers. It is not easy to answer with certainty although it is highly likely that some voters believed these slogans and, since Leave won with such a narrow margin of victory, it is legitimate to assume that this part of the electorate was ultimately decisive. Some polls confirm this hypothesis. In fact, according to a survey conducted by IPSOS MORI, 47 percent of voters believed that the UK actually used to send the EU £350 million a week, and around 45 percent was convinced that Turkey would have joined the EU in the near future (cf. Ball, 2017, p. 60). With regard to the arguments put forward by the Remain side, only 17% of voters believed it to be true that each household would become poorer on average, and only one out of five voters believed that Brexit would put Northern Ireland's stability at risk (cf. Ball, 2017, p. 60).

It might be argued that since Leave’s campaign was deceptive, voters cannot be held entirely responsible for the upshot of the referendum. However, Brennan would judge this issue differently: although it is right to argue that British voters were manipulated by the Leave campaign, it is also true that the two slogans, especially the one concerning migration, were easily verifiable. Therefore, more than simply ignorant, Brennan would argue that a consistent portion of voters was deliberately misinformed. From this point of view, the adoption of certain epistocratic tools might have generated a different ending: assuming that through an epistocratic system only competent people are allowed to vote, then it sounds reasonable to argue that the majority of citizens would not have believed the deceptive campaign led by Brexiteers. Additionally, assuming that only competent people were enfranchised, the Leave camp could have established another political campaign attempting to focus more on rational arguments rather than on preposterous slogans only designed to catch the support of sloppy voters.

Moreover, and it seems to be a plus point for the adoption of epistocracy, different studies and surveys have found a correlation between educational level and voting orientation: in fact, as Yougov reports, 68% of Remainers had a university degree, while 70% of Brexiteers only had a high school diploma (cf. Moore, 2016). This does not automatically mean that Remain was the right option and the British people were wrong. It only means that it is legitimate to suppose that the more educated people were also better-informed voters and, thus, less prone to believe the slogans deployed by Cummings.

Accordingly, if voters' misinformation represents a concrete and real problem, the implementation of epistocracy might be a solution. In fact, disenfranchising those misinformed people who are not undoubtedly endowed with basic political and economic knowledge might increase the specific weight of better-informed voters, leading to better governments and policies. However, things are more complicated than this, and in the next chapter I will explain why epistocracy does not represent an acceptable solution.

3. ON EPISTOCRACY: ANALYSIS AND OBJECTIONS

The solution, he [Brennan] thinks, is epistocracy, which would leave policy decisions largely in the hands of social-scientific experts or voters who pass tests of political knowledge. However, Brennan fails to explain why we should think that these putative experts are sufficiently knowledgeable to avoid making errors as damaging as those made by voters. [...] Brennan appears to be radically ignorant (Gunn, 2019, p. 1).

3.1. *The Epistocratic Account*

The first chapter briefly summarized the positions of Plato, Mill, Tocqueville, and Brennan regarding the relationship between democracy and incompetence, showing how epistocratic notions have progressively emerged in philosophical debate. The second chapter presented the overwhelming empirical evidence – supported by studies and the Brexit referendum – demonstrating the tendency of voters to be rather driven by biases and political tribalism than by critical reasoning. Additionally, as surveys conducted by ANES and IPSOS MORI suggest, voters tend to be misinformed on fundamental issues regarding political matters, showing either ignorance or lack of interest in issues concerning the *res publica*.

The goal of this chapter is to philosophically analyze the tenets supporting epistocracy and to verify if epistocracy might be considered as an admissible alternative to democracy. The philosophical principles behind epistocracy are not very numerous. Although the idea that democracy is flawed and other forms of political participation should

be taken into account date back to ancient Greece, a systematical and philosophical formulation of epistocracy was realized only in recent years by David Estlund in *Democratic Authority* (2008) and Jason Brennan in *Against Democracy* (2016). For the sake of completeness, I first quote and then briefly analyze each tenet in order to offer a better overview on the principles supporting epistocracy:

(1) **Truth tenet:** There are correct answers to (at least some) political questions. (Estlund, 2008, p. 30)

(2) **Knowledge tenet:** Some citizens know more of these truths or are more reliable at determining these truths than others. (Estlund, 2008, p. 30)

(3) **Anti-authority tenet:** When some citizens are morally unreasonable, ignorant, or incompetent about politics, this justifies not permitting them to exercise political authority over others. It justifies either forbidding them from holding power or reducing the power they have in order to protect innocent people from their incompetence. (Brennan, 2016, p. 17)

The **truth tenet** postulates that there are some indisputable and clearly evident truths in the field of social sciences. In opposition to the idea that only natural sciences enjoy a greater epistemic certainty, Jason Brennan and Bryan Caplan, among others, argue that it is also possible to reach truths in political and economic sciences, the evidence of which is incontrovertible (cf. Gunn, 2019, pp. 33-34). Thus, if the voter is not aware of these social truths, limiting their voting rights might sound like a legitimate solution.

The **knowledge tenet** is strictly connected to the truth tenet, as it postulates that there are some people who know these political truths and some others do not. This implies that the most knowledgeable people should be valorized by the voting system, whereas the impact of misinformed and/or ignorant ones should be reduced. It is worth noticing that if the validity of the first tenet is compromised, then the second tenet is affected as well.

In the end, the **anti-authority tenet**, which might be considered to be the core of the epistocratic principles, argues that it is legitimate to prevent or limit people from voting if they prove to be unfit – meaning ignorant, misinformed, incompetent or morally unreasonable (cf. Brennan, 2016, p. 17).

The truth tenet, the knowledge tenet, and the anti-authority tenet constitute the philosophical principles of the epistocratic account. Besides the tenets, Brennan summarizes his position in what he calls, “the final argument for epistocracy” (Brennan, 2016, p. 141),

which consists of five steps:

1. Against proceduralism: There are no good proceduralist grounds for preferring democracy to epistocracy.
2. **The competence principle:** It is presumed to be unjust and to violate a citizen's rights to forcibly deprive them of life, liberty, or property, or significantly harm their life prospects, as a result of decisions made by an incompetent deliberative body, or as a result of decisions made in an incompetent way or in bad faith. Political decisions are presumed legitimate and authoritative only when produced by competent political bodies in a competent way and in good faith.
3. **Corollary of the competence principle:** Presumptively, we ought to replace an incompetent political decision-making method with a more competent one.
4. **Comparative institutional claims:** Universal suffrage tends to produce incompetent decisions, while certain forms of epistocracies are likely to produce more competent decisions.
5. **Conclusion:** We should probably replace democracy with certain forms of epistocracy. (Brennan, 2016, pp. 141-142)

In light of this reasoning, Brennan points out that democracy is not an acceptable system per se as each vote weighs the same, no matter how ignorant, competent, or knowledgeable different voters are. As already mentioned in chapter I, the philosopher does not consider universal suffrage to be an inalienable right, but rather a right that must be deserved by demonstrating to have a corpus of basic knowledge about political matters.

It might be argued that restricted suffrage corresponds to an amputation of citizens' political rights, and this is problematic in an era in which we intuitively think that people should acquire more rights, not less. In response to this, Brennan's argumentation is two-fold.

(1) People usually connect the act of depriving people from voting as an act of lese majesty; however, he asserts that if we changed our outlook and started to consider voting no more than a license, then our worries would focus more on the disarming lack of preparation of voters (cf. Brennan, 2016, p. 18). (2) The right to vote remains available for all people, but citizens need to merit the exercise of this right since people can benefit or be strongly harmed by the outcome of elections (cf. Brennan, 2016, p. 216).

In other words, Brennan argues that, since voters play a crucial role in the formation of parliaments and governments, which, in turn, produce policies that will affect society at large, it is legitimate to require a competent electorate that decides with consciousness and *ratio*.

Except for these succinct principles, the arguments in favor of epistocracy draw their strengths, as ascertained in chapter II, from empirical evidence concerning the irrational and tribalistic behavior of voters and their ignorance about basic political matters. From this perspective and referring to Brennan's archetypical voters, he is right in categorizing the majority of voters as Hobbits and Hooligans.

After having briefly outlined the epistocratic account, I shall anticipate the main objections that I am going to raise against epistocracy in the next sections.

In the next two sections, I will show that experiments and studies have demonstrated that the expertise of competent people has often been insufficient to predict political facts, to understand which policies would be more effective, and to make them immune to biases and tribalism. Although the findings weaken the epistocratic hypothesis with regard to the reliability of experts, the results cannot be said to entirely confute the epistocratic claim: it still may be that, on the whole, epistocracy would work better than democracy. Since the former has still not been implemented on any political level, we cannot empirically compare the two. Thus, the validity or the confutation of epistocracy remains pending in this respect.

Nevertheless, there are further objections that highly question the realistic implementation of this system. From a logical point of view, epistocracy generates an epistemological vicious circle: if incompetent people should be prevented from voting, then it must be clarified who competent people are. In turn, this would presuppose that we already know which competencies are needed to critically analyze and choose good policies. However, this would lead to the question of what *the good* in the political field means, and answering this query is insurmountable unless we concede that the experts in light of their knowledge know the answers. However, this would mean begging the question about who is competent and who is not.

From a practical point of view, the notion of the expert in politics is ambiguous: one person may be an expert in economics, but completely ignorant about constitutional issues or energy policies; since it is highly unlikely that a voter is confident in so many different fields concerning politics, it remains unclear which realistic knowledge would qualify a voter as a competent one. It might be argued that tests could be introduced to ascertain the knowledge of voters; still, it seems difficult to understand which questions

would demonstrate that a voter is competent. By way of example, it is disputable to argue that knowing the name of the current Chancellor of Germany is an effective method to identify competent and incompetent voters.

From an ethical perspective, epistocracy seems unsustainable in light of the ‘demographic objection’ formulated by David Estlund. The latter argues that incompetent voters are more concentrated among the most disadvantaged social classes; thus, the adoption of epistocracy would strongly limit the political impact of the most vulnerable people by excluding them from active political participation. This would be cynical since these people, in addition to the difficult social conditions they already live in, would be deprived of their right to vote.

In the end and strictly connected to the demographic objection, the notion of competence adopted by Brennan is deceptive: he implicitly argues that a competent person is also trustworthy, but competence and trustworthiness are two different concepts, and their connection is not to be taken for granted. As Moraro argues:

if citizens are not good-willed, i.e., inclined to use their competence to further the common interest (rather than their own advantage), a voting system focused exclusively on competence may even increase people’s exposure to an undue risk of bad governance. (Moraro, 2018, p. 201)

In other words, competence per se does not guarantee better policies since there is no proof that competent people would vote for the common good rather than for preserving their own interest. This point is crucial as epistocracy harms the representation of incompetent people. In this regard, the idea that epistocracy would work better than democracy seems to be even less plausible.

3.2. *The Truth Tenet: Epistemological Objections*

After having outlined the principles supporting epistocracy and anticipated the main criticisms, this section will focus on the truth tenet, the next will analyze the knowledge tenet, and the final will consider the anti-authority tenet and the competence principle.

As far as the truth tenet is concerned, Jason Brennan, Bryan Caplan, and other social scientists argue that there are correct political answers to complex political issues. As a consequence, not being aware of these answers is a reason to disenfranchise ‘incom-

petent' people. Notwithstanding, the present subchapter will contend that Brennan's argument is rather approximative as it is based on a naïve idea of knowledge.

In particular, it will be argued that empirical evidence has shown that experts in social sciences rarely reach unanimous consensus on how social phenomena should be addressed to guarantee certain goals. Thus, it will be inferred that if social sciences are not able to guarantee evident and clear truths on how to solve political matters, the disenfranchisement of people on the basis of their knowledge in social sciences is inadmissible.

Brennan often asserts that legitimate voters should possess basic knowledge in social sciences in order to be considered competent voters (cf. Brennan, 2019; p. 7; cf. Brennan, 2016, p. 216). After all, if voters are ignorant in fields related to political matters, it does not seem unreasonable to enfranchise only those who have the ability to discern a reckless policy from an effective one. As Brennan points out, if we are on a trial, we expect the jury to be competent; ideally, we should expect the same from voters (cf. Brennan, 2016, p. 152). This reasoning is straightforward and, at first glance, rather convincing; however, I contend that things are more complicated than this. In fact, even though social sciences may be constituted by a corpus of *political facts*, these do not guarantee any certainty concerning 'the right policies' to choose.

First of all, it seems that Brennan counts "political facts" (Brennan, 2016, pp. 25-26) as all those notions and beliefs with which he himself agrees. This statement seems to be corroborated by the following citation:

Suppose I know candidates [Adam] Smith and Colbert both want to improve the economy, but Smith favors free trade, and Colbert favors protectionism. I can't make a reasonable choice between them unless I know whether free trade or protectionism is more likely to improve the economy; to know that, I need to know economics. (Brennan, 2016, p. 28)

In another passage, he polemizes, arguing that the American voter continues to believe in mercantilism although Adam Smith refuted this economic theory more than 240 years ago (cf. Brennan, 2016, p. 29), and that less-informed people unreasonably stand against free trade (cf. Brennan, 2019, p. 34). As Paul Gunn points out, these claims are intriguing for two reasons: (1) they display that for Brennan, 'social sciences' basically means economics (cf. Gunn, 2019, p. 8); (2) it makes clear that agreeing with Adam Smith means to be knowledgeable and competent (cf. Gunn, 2019, p. 9).

Now, many critics against the truth tenet (i.e., Gunn, Reiss, Hédoin) point out that

Brennan, Caplan, and other epistocrats often subtly assume that “economics is on their side.” (Gunn, 2019, p. 8) More explicitly, Caplan states that “economists are right and public is wrong.” (Caplan, 2007, p. 82)

If that were the case, then we should infer that research has achieved a unanimous consensus on certain economic facts, on the basis of which experts are able to ascertain effective policies from ineffective ones.

However, empirical evidence has shown that experts rarely reach irrefutable economic facts since, “in the social sciences, judgements over legitimate expertise are inextricably bound up with membership in schools of thought.” (Reiss, 2019, p. 5) Consequently, as the next examples will display, assuming the existence of irrefutable and uncontroversial truths in economics seems presumptive at best.

Paradigmatically, the majority of economists are favorable to free trade. Among supporters of a market economy, however, different schools of thought have suggested various approaches on how to solve specific economic issues. For instance, while neo-classical exponents would often favor laissez-faire policies, neo-Keynesians would encourage more substantial state intervention. Both approaches are supported by eminent economists and have offered relevant contributions to public debate. Still, history shows that none of the aforementioned approaches seems to be uncontroversial.

By way of example, neo-Keynesian approaches were demonstrated to be particularly effective since the end of the WWII but lost their efficacy in the seventies (cf. Snowden et al., 2005, p. 102); as a consequence, the successive weak and unstable economic situation paved the way for the adoption of monetarist and neoclassical approaches, which are particularly criticized nowadays after having been praised throughout the previous two decades.

Another example concerns price control policies. Brennan argues that “there is also a wide range of agreed-on views, such as that we should have free trade and avoid price controls. The voting public gets the easy questions always wrong.” (Brennan, 2016, p. 193) Such a strong economic conviction is, however, not supported by all experts. With regard to the neoclassical criticism against price control, according to which the adoption of minimum wage would raise unemployment, the 2008 Nobel prize Paul Krugman stated:

Until the Card-Krueger study, most economists, myself included, assumed that raising the minimum wage would have a clear negative effect on employment. But they found, if anything, a positive effect. Their result has since been confirmed using data from many episodes. There's just no evidence that raising the minimum wage costs jobs, at least when the starting point is as low as it is in modern America. (Krugman in Reiss, 2019, p. 8)

This does not imply that a Nobel prize winner must always be right – it would be an unjustifiable *argumentum ab auctoritate* – neither do I mean to argue that the epistemic validity of a concept depends on whether or not the entire scientific community agrees. Instead, this remark simply aims to show that irrefutable political facts are not so easy to detect as Brennan leads us to believe.

With regard to this, Julian Reiss provides three reasons why it is so difficult to assert irrefutable truths in social sciences:

First, an important part of making a political judgment involves trade-offs between different social goals such as freedom vs. equality or wealth vs. security. While an expert might have a better understanding of the nature of these trade-offs, coming down on one side or the other can only be based on values that are in no way more accessible to the expert than the layperson.

Second, there is considerable uncertainty in the application of a value or goal in a concrete context.

Third, there is considerable uncertainty in the means-ends relationships, even when there is agreement on which goals to pursue and what that means in a given context.

Regarding the first reason, I am convinced that Reiss uncovers one of the most fragile among Brennan's assumptions, namely his perception of social sciences as a mere technical subject. Following his logic, economics is able to reach incontrovertible facts and infer the right policies (cf. Gunn, 2019, p. 42).

However, any political decision involves inevitable trade-offs and is affected by cultural, social, and ethical (e.g., which values should be preferred?) considerations, not merely economic ones. In light of this, even social scientists puzzle themselves over the nature of social facts and the search for best policies. Not only that, even while postulating which goals should be pursued by certain policies, experts may disagree on which policies should be concretely implemented to pursue these goals.

As Gunn points out, social sciences make extensive use of models to interpret and analyze the complexity of world phenomena under different lenses. The adoption of these models is valuable as it allows experts to make accurate predictions over reality. However, the existence of so many different – and sometimes contradictory – models is also

proof that there are no easy answers to complex social phenomena (cf. Gunn, 2019, pp. 12-13). From this point of view, I agree with Landemore when she argues that only simple problems have an incontrovertible solution that produce a *Eureka* feeling (cf. Landemore, 2014, p. 220). However, real-world problems are never simple to solve.

Paradigmatically, economists and social experts continue to discuss whether the TARP (*Troubled Asset Relief Program*) bill approved by the Bush administration in 2008 to combat the first aftermath of the recession has been effective. By the same token, the debate on the main causes of the 2008 economic crisis still puzzles experts today (cf. Gunn, 2019, p. 10).

Not to speak about the fact that the large majority of economists argued that Lehman Brothers could not go bankrupt because it was too big to fail, and low interest rates would have constituted a manageable risk (cf. Friedman et al., 2011, chs. 1-3).

What these examples show is that despite experts having had all the elements to analyze a specific issue in-depth, complexity can be so overwhelming that a large consensus on political facts or economic truths may not be reached.

Nonetheless, the epistemic standpoint of Brennan and Caplan is that “social problems are simple” (Gunn, 2019, p. 37) to understand and resolve. In regard to this, the distinction between robust and feeble facts made by Reiss is thought-provoking for the goals of this subchapter. **Robust facts** are those notions which seem to be unconfutable (e.g., the notion of gravity), while **feeble facts** concern all theories that are commonly accepted by the scientific community, but it is not excluded that research may variate their epistemic status over time (cf. Reiss, 2019, p. 7). This distinction may sound way too dogmatic; however, it may help to understand that the notions of social sciences are not based on uncontroversial truths. By way of example, it must not be forgotten that the DSM (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*) classified homosexuality as a mental disorder until 1973 (cf. De Block et al., 2013, pp. 276-298), while the large majority of scientists and laypeople would find this classification outrageous and shocking nowadays.

Following Reiss's categorization, I argue that Brennan has committed two errors of assessment: (1) he views the social sciences as consisting of solid facts rather than feeble

facts; (2) he underestimates the complexity of real-world phenomena by ignoring all factors that complicate the understanding of what a ‘right’ policy should consist of.

It seems pertinent to make a clarification: the goal of this subchapter is not to bring into question the trustworthiness of social sciences; on the contrary, their models and findings are rather effective tools to interpret the complexity of reality. Rather, I am contending the approximative foundation of the truth tenet presented by Brennan.

In fact, the claim according to which, “there are correct answers to (at least some) political questions” (Estlund, 2007, p. 30) is appealing but insufficient for justifying the adoption of epistocracy.

As this subchapter attempts to explain, there is no wide consensus on how to solve complex political matters without mentioning that the real-world is characterized by challenging interconnected issues (e.g., climate change, economic sustainability, universal welfare, energetic independence, diplomatic relationships, etc.), the solutions to which are never easy to achieve *a priori* by social sciences. In other words, there are some truths in social sciences, but political matters are way too complex to expect that social sciences may have the answers to solve political problems. Arguing the contrary means supporting an ideological vision of things, according to which a specific political and economic perspective is able to explain the complexity of reality.

Thus, if eminent social scientists quarrel over correct political answers to complex problems, it is unlikely that unequivocally correct political answers to complex problems exist. Hence, the idea of enfranchising people on the basis of their knowledge in social sciences is unsustainable, as it is unclear which factual knowledge or eminent social truths would prevent them from being “ignorant, irrational, misinformed nationalists.” (Brennan, 2016, p. 23)

3.3. *The Knowledge Tenet: Against the Philosopher-King*

If the truth tenet is inconsistent for epistocratic purposes, the knowledge tenet is affected as well since the two tenets are strongly connected. In fact, if the former postulates that “there are correct answers to (at least some) political questions,” (Estlund, 2008, p. 30) the second tenet argues that “some citizens know more of these truths or are more

reliable at determining these truths than others.” (Estlund, 2008, p. 30)

After having shown that real-world phenomena are too complex to expect incontrovertible political answers from the social sciences, it should be inferred that, while the knowledge of experts is valuable, it does not result in irrefutable political answers.

The epistocrat Bryan Caplan, however, in *The Myth of The Rational Voter* (2007), argues that, “we should become more confident that economists are right and public is wrong.” (Caplan, 2007, p. 83) The core of his argument is based on two assumptions: (1) experts are less biased than non-experts; (2) experts predict events better than non-experts in light of their knowledge (cf. Caplan, 2007, pp. 28-52).

Conversely, in this subchapter it will be argued that: (1) being an expert does not automatically mean to be less biased; (2) there is no empirical proof that experts perform better predictions than non-experts. Thus, disenfranchising incompetent people by appealing to the existence of experts is a weak argument.

Concerning the first point, Caplan argues that laypeople are affected in their critical reasoning by numerous biases, many of which have already been analyzed in chapter II. In addition to these biases, Caplan argues that the public is strongly influenced by a set of false beliefs that we could call *anti-capitalistic biases*. The most important one is the anti-market bias, which I shall briefly address.

It must be admitted that profiting off of one's own business has been regarded as something controversial in the history of Western philosophy. This was particularly true for ancient Greece (i.e., see Plato's *Laws*, books V, VIII, XI) as well as for early Christian thinkers. Only with the rise of Protestantism did the perception of making profit become less stigmatized and even praised in some cases. With regard to this, the *Use of Money* (1760) by John Wesley, and *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel* (1726) written by Joseph Butler are works written by religious men in the 18th century that testify this tendency. However, the openness shown towards capitalism did not mean that all criticisms disappeared. On the contrary, Fourier pointed out – contradicting Adam Smith – that private interest does not always coincide with the common good (cf. Fourier, 1972, p. 114). In light of the entire history of economic philosophy, Schumpeter observed that, “capitalism stands its trial before judges who have the sentence of death in their pockets.” (Schumpeter, 1950, p. 144)

According to Caplan, all these criticisms against the market economy have inevitably shaped people's minds (cf. Caplan, 2007, p. 30), determining a misrepresentation of capitalism's merits. Paradigmatically, Caplan observes that nonexperts tend to ignore benefits produced by the market economy, which has made it possible to raise citizens' living standards like never before (cf. Caplan, 2007, p. 31). Furthermore, Caplan remarks that the average person considers capitalism something evil because it is based on competition rather than, for instance, solidarity (cf. Caplan, 2007, pp. 30-31). In many passages of the book, Caplan claims that while the public is constantly biased by this and many other biases, experts are more immune to false interpretations of reality because they possess a corpus of knowledge that protect them from false beliefs (cf. Caplan, p. 52). Not only this, but he also argues that if we start doubting experts, then it becomes controversial to assert what is true or not. In particular, Caplan states:

as the great cognitive psychologists Kahneman and Tversky describe their method: "The presence of an error of judgment is demonstrated by comparing people's responses either with an established fact or with an accepted rule of arithmetic, logic, or statistics." "Established" or "accepted" by whom? By experts, of course. In principle, experts could be mistaken instead of the public. But if mathematicians, logicians, or statisticians say the public is wrong, who would dream of "blaming the experts?" (Caplan, 2007, pp. 52-53)

This argument is rather persuasive: after all, it is reasonable to assume that experts, being knowledgeable of their field, may be more aware of specific phenomena that the lay public usually ignores. Tellingly, Caplan argues: "You may not be fully convinced of economists' wisdom. I, too, doubt it on occasion. But it is hard to avert your gaze from the public's folly." (Caplan, 2007, p. 83)

In 1964, Philip Converse published "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics," one of the pioneering articles on voters' disconcerting lack of preparation in terms of political notions. The article is often cited by epistocrats to confirm their thesis that the average voter is ignorant and biased, whereas the expert is competent and reflective (e.g., see Brennan, 2016, p. 25, 32, 51-52).

However, Brennan and others omit a crucial part of Converse's findings, in which it is argued that people with considerable political knowledge tend to be more dogmatic and less open to those positions that are in contrast with their beliefs (cf. Converse, 1964, p. 213; cf. Gunn, 2019, p. 10).

In an attempt to explain this phenomenon, Converse came up with the conclusion that knowledgeable people tend to organize their knowledge within a structured system of values and beliefs. Hence, this system of beliefs determines which concepts will be welcomed or rejected (cf. Gunn, 2019, p. 10).

Furthermore, some recent studies (see Mutz 2006, Taber and Lodge 2006) which analyzed the behavior of people during a deliberation have confirmed that the most informed people tend to be the most stubborn and less prone to changing their opinion (Gunn, 2019, p. 17). Using the categorizations proposed by Brennan, it could be argued that if laypeople are at risk of becoming Hobbits, competent people might turn out to be Hooligans.

These findings do not intend to dispute the credibility of experts; instead, they only show that competent people – exactly like laypeople – may be affected by some sort of tribalism that can influence their critical reasoning.

However, epistocrats might argue that competent people have superior political judgement to laypeople (cf. Brennan, 2016, 121) in light of their knowledge. Supporting this idea, Caplan showed the outcomes of a survey conducted in 1996 by the SAE (Survey of Americans and Economists on the Economy), in which the economic opinions of experts (people with a Ph.D. in economics) and nonexperts (the lay public) were compared. The findings showed that the positions of the two groups were radically different. Caplan used this data to argue that, “when an expert disagrees with a non-expert, the expert is right.” (Caplan, 2007, p. 81) In another passage of his work, Caplan argued that experts are able to predict the effectiveness of some policies or the outcomes of specific situations (cf. Caplan, 2007, pp. 52-57).

However, the psychologist Philip Tetlock conducted an imponent study analyzing the ability of experts to predict the short-term effects of specific economic measures and political events (cf. Kahneman, 2011, p. 292). Between 1988 and 2003, more than 280 experts in the field of economics, political sciences, law, diplomacy, etc. were called to answer questions concerning the GDP growth of Argentina, the privatization processes in the Communist bloc, the economic outlook of emerging states, etc. (cf. Tetlock, 2005, pp. 44-45).

“The results were devastating. Experts performed worse than they would have if

they had simply assigned equal probabilities to each of the three potential outcomes.” (Kahneman, 2011, p. 293)

Furthermore, Tetlock found that the range of accuracy between those who knew best and those who did not know much was very small. The author traced the cause of this phenomenon to the fact that those who were aware of their significant knowledge became overconfident in their ability to predict reality (cf. Kahneman, 2011, p. 294). Tellingly, it was also noticed that the more eminent the expert was, the more emphatic his or her statements were (cf. Tetlock, 2005, p. 231).

Similar findings have been observed in another study conducted by Keston Green and J.S. Armstrong, aimed at measuring the prediction abilities of experts about economic issues. As the authors claimed: “our findings confirmed this. Most respondents nonetheless expected experts to be better forecasters than novices. They were wrong. Expertise did not improve accuracy. Neither experts nor novices did substantially better than guessing.” (Green et al., 2007, p. 293 in Reiss, 2019, p. 4)

All in all, the findings showed that: (1) the opinions of eminent experts, even when unanimous, may be wrong; (2) “whether experts are better at predicting the effects of existing policies [...] tells us little about whether they can accurately identify those *new* policies that would cause more beneficial consequences than harmful ones.” (Gunn, 2019, p. 44)

Brennan criticized the findings of the study, arguing that the questions were way too complex to expect accurate answers (cf. Gunn, 2019, p. 40). In response to this, it may be objected that, “if experts cannot solve controversial problems better than dart-throwing chimps, then how can expertise be considered the answer to disagreement?” (Gunn, 2019, p. 40)

This section intends to confute the validity of the knowledge tenet, according to which, “some citizens know more of these truths or are more reliable at determining these truths than others.” (Estlund, 2008, p. 30) As this chapter showed, to argue that experts are less biased and better at predicting phenomena than laypeople – as Brennan and Caplan argue – is an assumption debunked by empirical evidence. In light of the foregoing, limiting the voting rights of noncompetent people in the name of an epistocratic system seems unacceptable for two interconnected reasons: (1) Although experts possess

extensive knowledge in their field of competence, their predictive ability is not significantly better than that of nonexperts and, like the latter, can be influenced by biases and arrive at rough misjudgments. (2) Consequently, disenfranchising nonexperts would be a draconian and approximate measure that, in any case, would not necessarily result in a better electorate capable of discerning the efficacy of policies.

Before analyzing the anti-authority tenet, it seems crucial to underline one aspect: the truth and knowledge tenets are not completely false, but they become problematic if one formulates them in a general, absolute, and undifferentiated form, as Brennan does. Problematic is namely his idea that social sciences are mainly composed of uncontroversial truths and that experts know them. It is true that social sciences can provide correct answers to some political problems, but this does not apply to the most complex issues with which politics is daily confronted. By the same token, it is true that experts are better informed in their field of competence than non-experts, but this does not imply that they are less biased or less tribal than laypeople.

This interpretation generates an epistemic vicious circle: arguing that there are correct political answers to complex political problems and that experts know them implies that there are people who intrinsically know what is ‘good’ and what is ‘bad’ in politics. This inference, however, is epistemologically bizarre for three reasons: 1) as the next chapter will show, it is unclear who the knowledgeable are and on what criteria they can be determined to be so; 2) it is unclear what expertise leads to good political choices; 3) it is unclear what is good in politics. As pointed out before, any political decision is confronted with a series of trade-offs and involves different spheres (including the ethical one) that make it hard to identify a policy as the correct one unless we concede that the experts know the truth. From this perspective, the epistocratic account appears epistemologically naïve and approximate (cf. Gunn, 2019, p. 3).

3.4. *The Anti-Authority Tenet and Final Considerations: Moral and Practical Objections*

After having illustrated the flaws contained in the first two epistocratic tenets, this subchapter aims to analyze the consistency of the anti-authority tenet and the competence

principle.

As pointed out in the first chapter, David Estlund was the philosopher who first provided an organic formulation of the epistocratic tenets. While he accepted the truth tenet and the knowledge tenet, he found the authority tenet inadmissible; the latter claims that: “when some citizens have greater knowledge or reliability, this justifies granting them political authority over those with lesser knowledge.” (Estlund, 2008, p. 30)

Jason Brennan recognizes Estlund’s position on the authority tenet which both consider problematic as “possessing superior knowledge is not sufficient to justify having any power, let alone greater power, than others.” (Brennan, 2016, pp. 16-17) Consequently, Brennan opts for the adoption of another principle – theoretically antithetical to the authority tenet – which is supposed to be immune to previous criticisms, namely the anti-authority tenet:

when some citizens are morally unreasonable, ignorant, or incompetent about politics, this justifies not permitting them to exercise political authority over others. It justifies either forbidding them from holding power or reducing the power they have in order to protect innocent people from their incompetence. (Brennan, 2016, p. 17)

The idea is ingenious: instead of defending the idea that experts should rule, the anti-authority tenet shifts attention to the incompetence of people. Since they are deemed to be potentially harmful and ignorant, incompetent people should be prevented from voting or at least limited in their voting rights. In other words, the focus of the tenet does not hinge on the experts, but on the incompetence of voters.

Still, this tenet is, in my opinion, subject to several criticisms that this subchapter will illustrate. The first one is the formality objection, in which it is argued that the anti-authority tenet is still based on a paternalistic view of politics despite its new formulation. The methodological objection contests that the definition of ‘incompetent people’ is too vague and that there are no indisputable ways to identify ignorant voters *ex ante*. The demographic objection, first formulated by David Estlund, argues that disenfranchising or limiting the voting power of ignorant people would mean depriving the electorate of the most disadvantaged classes, which are often less educated. The responsibility objection points out that, although voters play an important role in the formation of parliaments and governments, their impact on policy making is less relevant than Brennan leads us to

think. Finally, some reflections concerning the competence principle will be drawn, concluding that epistocracy may not be the solution to guarantee more informed and competent voters.

3.4.1. *The Formal Objection*

According to Brennan, the anti-authority tenet aims to escape the pitfalls contained in the authority tenet, namely the accusation of supporting paternalistic views. However, I argue that the tenet is not immune to this objection.

While the new formulation of the principle does not praise the expertise of knowledgeable people, nor argues that experts should rule, the combination of the anti-authority tenet with the previous tenets (truth and knowledge) actually reintroduces a masked paternalism. In fact, arguing that: (1) there are incontrovertible truths in political matters, (2) there are people who are aware of these truths, and (3) arguing that incompetent people should be limited from voting means *de facto* to argue that competent people should rule in the name of their knowledge. It is not possible to contemplate any other alternative.

In other words, I claim that the adoption of the anti-authority tenet only addresses the relationship between competence and voting rights from a different perspective, but the contents of the principle do not change compared to the authority tenet. In fact, the anti-authority tenet is subtly based on paternalism since it makes clear who should be prevented from voting, letting us assume which voters should be valorized and why (experts as they know better what is right in light of their truths).

It is interesting to note that despite the accusations of paternalism against epistocracy, the word ‘paternalism’ was not mentioned in *Against Democracy* even once. However, in a recent article, Brennan admitted that, in principle, paternalists should support epistocracy (cf. Brennan, 2022, pp. 329-332) since the core of any epistocracy consists of limiting the harm produced by voters, who are generally considered unable to make good political decisions.

3.4.2. *The Methodological Objection: Who is the Competent Voter?*

The anti-authority tenet postulates that incompetent people should be prevented from voting or that their voting rights should be reduced. If this tenet shifts the attention

from the experts to incompetent people, it must be explained which methods would be effective to identify this incompetence and diminish its impact. This issue is preeminent, as epistocracy is a system that, in the hopes of Brennan and other intellectuals, should strive to replace democracy. However, there are several obstacles. First of all, because “competency seems to be a scalar property, not a binary one” (Kuljanin, 2019, p. 87), it is necessary to determine a threshold that unequivocally distinguishes between competent and incompetent people. However, there are no irrefutable methods that clearly mark this distinction.

For instance, if the enfranchisement process depends on degrees – as Mill suggested in the XVIII century – the electorate would be potentially composed only of educated people like physicians, engineers, philosophers, economists, etc. However, possessing a title in a specific field of knowledge (e.g., geology) does not automatically mean to be competent in political matters (cf. Kuljanin, pp. 85-86).

The most immediate method to assess the competence of voters could consist in a test aiming at evaluating their political knowledge. Still, it would be problematic to understand which kind of questions would identify incompetent voters. For instance, it is legitimate to assume that knowing the name of the Minister of Foreign Affairs or remembering the year in which a specific policy was introduced would not necessarily skim the incompetent voters. Such results would not determine whether they are capable of understanding which policies would be effective in the short-term or if their critical reasoning is objective and not tribalistic.

Another problem regards the difficulty of the test: if the questions are too easy, the test would not fulfil its purposes of disenfranchising incompetent people. By the same token, if the questions challenge the historical, social, economic, and political knowledge of voters, there is a high risk that the large majority of them would not pass the test since it seems unlikely that a single voter could possess such immense knowledge. In other words, it is not clear to what extent testing the superficial factual knowledge of voters should make it possible to select competent voters.

For the sake of argument, even assuming that tests could be a reasonable measure, it is not clear who should design these tests and which topics should be addressed. Polemically, Kuljanin pointed out that epistocracy would need a meta-epistocracy, namely

an institutional body to prepare these tests. In turn, this would imply the necessity of a meta-meta-epistocracy to determine who should prepare the contents of the tests (cf. Kuljanin, 2019, p. 85). This process would go on *ad infinitum* without answering practical and fundamental questions such as: (1) **which expertise** is needed to be a competent voter, (2) **how is it possible to determine which expertise** a competent voter should possess, and (3) **how can we determine what is unquestionably true** in political matters in light of the fact that there are no easy answers to complex political problems.

A more ingenious idea is the enfranchisement lottery proposed by Claudio López-Guerra, which works as follows: anyone is a potential voter, but only a restricted electorate is randomly selected for a specific election. The voters will be expected to take part in mandatory educational programs aiming at increasing their political knowledge, at the conclusion of which they would be allowed to vote (cf. Lopez-Guerra, 2011, 212-213).

At first glance, this kind of epistocracy seems hardly objectionable, as this proposal does not ‘punish’ the ignorance of people, but it strives to improve their political preparation. However, it seems hard to assume that the outcomes of such crash-courses might be able to transform a potential incompetent voter into an expert. For instance, it must be questioned if a basic course in economics is sufficient to make a voter aware of the mechanisms of inflation, price fluctuations, monetary policies, etc. The risk at stake is that these selected people might be affected by a sense of false competence which would make them even more biased (cf. Kuljanin, 2019, p. 84).

It is important to remark that the importance of such courses is not the object of criticism; rather, the idea that an incompetent voter might become a careful observer of real-world phenomena in a short period of time seems to be unrealistic. In addition to this, the price for adopting the enfranchisement lottery is high since only a small portion of voters would be allowed to vote.

From this point of view, instead of excogitating different epistocratic tools in order to have a small number of competent voters, it should be asked what could be done to have an effective educational system and a high-quality media, among other things. With regard to this, an interesting study carried out by Curran suggested that there is a strong connection between the quality of media and levels of knowledge in the population. In particular, the research showed that

countries with strong public broadcasters, more regulation of private broadcasters, and less market driven media systems have significantly higher levels of public knowledge. Furthermore, countries that have the highest levels of public knowledge also show the least variation in knowledge between different socio-economic groups. Finally, we can observe (even though it is not part of the research) that countries with the best scores (Finland and Denmark) also have much less inequality than those with lower scores (the US and up to a level the UK). (Curran in Kuljanin, 2019, p. 84)

In conclusion, the anti-authority tenet postulates the limitation of voting rights for incompetent people, but it remains obscure which methods and criteria should be adopted to identify incompetent voters.

3.4.3. *The Demographic Objection*

Despite the difficulties encountered, epistocracy remains a tempting system since it postulates the notion of competence as the main criterion to enfranchise people. Many criticisms have been raised against some forms of epistocracy that aim to disenfranchise voters. On the other hand, it must be admitted that even mature democracies apply rather disputable forms of disenfranchisement that concern a large part of the population: by way of example, all minors around the world are prevented from voting, but the voting age arbitrarily varies from 16 (like Austria and Scotland) to 25 (United Arab Emirates). Likewise, capable adult immigrants are not allowed to vote in many countries because they do not possess citizenship in the state where they reside. In light of this, using the notion of competence for determining who should vote appears to be more grounded and meritocratic than disenfranchising someone in name of their age or nationality (cf. Somin, 2019, p. 5).

However, possessing a consistent corpus of knowledge is not only a matter of merit. In this regard, the most effective criticism against the anti-authority tenet is the demographic objection, which was first formulated by David Estlund in *Democratic Authority*. The argument claims that if epistocracy allows only competent people to vote, this system would only advantage the wealthiest people – generally more educated – and harm disadvantaged people – generally less educated (cf. Estlund, 2007, pp. 211-215).

As many studies show, women, people of color, and individuals coming from a low social milieu indeed possess less political knowledge than white male people (cf. Brennan, 2016, p. 31). Moreover, it must not be forgotten that, “poverty is inversely related to

quality of education and is often geographically concentrated [...] This means that the effects of epistocratic restricted suffrage [...] would serve to create entire neighborhoods that are largely disenfranchised.” (Klocksien, 2019, p. 26) Thus, the representative power of vulnerable category of people and disadvantaged geographical areas would be strongly diminished in an epistocratic system.

In light of this, it may be argued that the demographic objection shows that epistocracy is no more than a masked comeback of aristocracy by establishing competence as a criterion to enfranchise people.

Brennan replied to the demographic objection several times (Brennan, 2016, Brennan, 2017, Brennan 2019). For the purposes of this thesis, I will analyze one of the most effective counter-objections presented by the philosopher.

In the second edition of *Against Democracy*, the author observed that many people of color and poor people voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election, ignoring the large number of racist statements made by the tycoon during the electoral campaign and the fact that his electoral program advantaged rich people (cf. Brennan, 2018, p. 37).

In light of the foregoing, Brennan inferred that many voters are not able to recognize the policies that serve their interests. This is particularly true for the most disadvantaged classes, who are also the most incompetent ones. At the same time, the philosopher argues that competent voters are more aware of the policies pursuing the common good; thus, Brennan argues that to limit the voting rights of incompetent people may undermine the political participation of the most disadvantaged classes, but competent voters would support those candidates pursuing the common good (cf. Brennan, 2016, p. 228).

It must be conceded that empirical evidence shows how many voters may not be able to understand which policies would serve their own interests; however, Brennan’s argument is flawed for two reasons.

First of all, the fact that the wealthiest people are more competent does not automatically imply that they will pursue the common good. In fact, competence per se does not guarantee that voters will vote more wisely. After all, racist, chauvinist, biased, and egoistic individuals might also be found among well-educated people who, far from vot-

ing for the ‘best policies,’ may tend to favor and preserve their own interests. As a consequence, being competent is not a sufficient precondition for fostering good policies. After all, it seems that Brennan confuses the notion of competence with that of trustworthiness; however, the two concepts are not related, and this leads to the conclusion that a system ruled only by experts would not necessarily pursue the common good (cf. Moraro, 2018, p. 212). Thus, the demographic objection remains undefeated by Brennan’s counterargument.

Secondly, the paternalistic argument, according to which competent people would pursue the common good, seems to be debunked by history. For instance, at the end of the American Civil War, black people were freed; however, many Southern states introduced tricky literacy tests that aimed to prevent people of color from active political participation (cf. Klocksien, 2019, pp. 24-25). As pointed out by Arlen and Rossi, social achievements have very rarely been obtained thanks to the generosity of the ruling class, but thanks to the efforts of the disadvantaged classes striving for equality (cf. Arlen, Rossi, 2018, p. 8). From this perspective, democratic representation has been a relevant social gain which should not be discarded in the name of competence.

Thus, if the anti-authority principle argues that ignorant and incompetent people should be disenfranchised from active politics, “in order to protect innocent people from their incompetence” (cf. Brennan, 2016, p. 17), the demographic objection shows that the harm in an epistocracy seems to be much higher than in a democracy. In fact, disenfranchising or limiting the voting rights of incompetent people would mean to favor the wealthiest classes which, in turn, may not pursue the common good. If this goal is not met, then we must infer that epistocracy would only concretely risk harming disadvantaged people.

In conclusion, the epistocratic assumption according to which, “a well-educated population will, other things equal, tend to rule more wisely” (Estlund, 2008, p. 211), might work only assuming that competent people are less triggered by false beliefs and their social position. However, psychology and history have shown that this is not the case.

3.4.4. *The Responsibility Objection*

The implicit assumption of the anti-authority tenet is that voters' lack of knowledge automatically leads to incompetent parliaments and governments, which, in turn, leads to bad policies. This idea is supported by many epistocrats (e.g., Brennan, Caplan, Thomas Christiano, Claudio Lopez-Guerra).

However, the responsibility objection contests this conjecture and argues that the anti-authority tenet overestimates the importance given to voters, ignoring the crucial role (and the possible incompetence) played by legislators.

In fact, whereas voters opt for one candidate or party during elections, the successive decisions depend much more on the will and the competences of legislators. In other words, in mature representative democracies there is an inevitable power asymmetry between the will of the people – which is called to elections every few years – and what the ruling class does during its term. This gap between the will of the people and the concrete actions of legislative bodies is a fundamental feature of any democratic system.

Thus, to blame voters for ineffective policies is a rhetorical exercise that actually hides a more complex situation, in which the autonomy of legislators in their decision-making is probably more crucial than the will of the people. Even accepting that voters show an incredible lack of knowledge in political matters, their representatives should ideally mediate between the intentions of voters and the challenges of realpolitik. Still, Brennan mainly points the finger at the ignorance of voters for producing bad policies.

Hence, both agents – voters and legislators – play a crucial role. From this point of view, it might surprise that Brennan does not suggest the adoption of any epistocratic tools (knowledge tests, admission through titles, etc.) for the ruling class. After all, if the role of the ruling class is more decisive than voters concerning policymaking, it appears more reasonable that more restrictive elective criteria are applied for the ruling class.

In addition to this, Brennan shows a rather populist vision of democracy in his argument, as if the system were a mechanical choice tool (Arlen and Rossi, 2018, p. 10), by which the will of voters would automatically produce desired laws. It may be the case (and the rise of many populist parties in charge have increased this phenomenon), but it is not necessarily so.

Thus, if the anti-authority tenet holds the incompetence of voters to be potentially

harmful for society, I point out that: (1) the tenet disregards the crucial role played by legislators, who are together with voters responsible for the decisions concerning the *res publica*; (2) hence, the adoption of some epistocratic tools aiming at limiting the voting rights of incompetent voters cannot avoid the formation of bad policies, as representatives will be primarily responsible for making laws.

3.4.5. *Final Considerations on the Competence Principle*

After having analyzed the tenets in detail, it seems that epistocracy is an appealing, yet ineffective answer to the concrete problem of voters' incompetence. In his final argument for epistocracy, Brennan introduces the competence principle arguing that

it is presumed to be unjust and to violate a citizen's rights to forcibly deprive them of life, liberty or property, or significantly alter their life prospects, as a result of decisions made by an incompetent or morally unreasonable deliberative body, or as a result of decisions made in an incompetent and morally unreasonable way. (Brennan, 2016, p. 141)

In other words, the competence principle points to the importance of having a competent electorate which is able to discern complex and decisive issues. However, it seems almost impossible that any kind of epistocracy might work as a *deus ex machina*, making the competence principle possible, as the previous sections showed. On the contrary, while it is uncertain that the adoption of an enfranchisement lottery, a plural voting system, the skimming of voters through degrees, the use of tests, etc. would produce better voters, the only certainty is that any epistocratic system would generate a harm in representation for a large number of voters by disenfranchising or underrepresenting them. In other words, it seems that the risks of adopting an epistocratic system are more numerous than the possible advantages (cf. Moraro, 2018, pp. 212-215).

Furthermore, to equate exercising the right to vote with something that must be earned, like a driver's license, is a persuasive but inadmissible idea. In fact, when people learn to drive, they focus on rather specific issues (i.e., traffic regulations and how a car works). On the other hand, a supposed voting license should include anything that is relevant for the *res publica*, namely an immense set of different subjects (economics, political sciences, notions about climate change, history, statistics, labor law, etc.), the knowledge of which can never be sufficiently possessed by the average individual. In this regard, the competence of voters cannot be tested through an exam.

Moreover, the possible underrepresentation or disenfranchisement of voters is not to be considered as something negative only for symbolic reasons, but also for practical ones since the possible reduction of the electorate would cause an epistemic loss of diversity (cf. Hédoin, 2021, pp. 507-508). Democracy is not only a tool for deciding policies, but it is also a system through which different social identities confront each other via political participation (cf. Arlen, Rossi, 2019, p. 10). In light of this, cutting or limiting voting rights would mean to favor oligarchic stances and encourage citizens not to take care of a right which has been obtained “through blood and tears.” (cf. Arlen, Rossi, 2019, p. 9)

It must be clarified in which other ways the undeniable lack of preparation of many voters could be tackled in order to favor a more competent electorate. I suspect that there are no easy solutions, nor is this thesis able to provide an enlightening answer on how to enhance the political awareness of voters other than to suggest consistent investments in the educational system and ensure the high quality of objective, non-sensationalistic, and accessible information through the media.

Unfortunately, there is no system that would transform the ignorant voter into an assertive one. In this sense, the fulfilment of the competence principle appears to be an *ideal* goal that should be pursued by *real* and *flawed* democracy.

4. TEACHING EPISTOCRACY AT SCHOOL

4.1. *Preliminary Considerations*

The first research question of this thesis addressed the validity of the epistocratic tenets and sought to understand whether epistocracy may be considered a sustainable and desirable option to compensate for the flaws of the democratic system. As certified in chapter I, criticisms against democracy date back to its foundation in Ancient Greece. It is interesting to observe that the main limits ascribed to this system have remained the same over time. In particular, the most stinging objections claim that: (1) since all people are called to vote – regardless of competencies and knowledge – it is highly possible that ensuing policies are strongly influenced by the ignorance of voters. In other words, democracy may risk becoming a *mediocracy*; in which voters, tendentially incompetent and ignorant, would support demagogical or bad policies: (2) A democratic system would easily risk paving the way to the tyranny of majority, as Alexis de Tocqueville warned in *Democracy in America*, without its necessary check and balances aimed at protecting political minorities.

Furthermore, the situation concerning the supposed ignorance of ordinary people seems not to have changed as well: as the studies and surveys mentioned in the second chapter have demonstrated, the typical voter tends to be rather irrational, uninformed, and uninterested in politics. In light of these *old* but still current concerns, Jason Brennan postulated a *new* system – epistocracy – in which only ‘competent’ people are supposed to vote.

Nonetheless, the analysis conducted in the third chapter showed that epistocracy is an appealing, but invalid alternative to democracy because of its controversial principles, the difficulties related to its concrete implementation, and the dangers to which this system would be exposed if implemented. However, while epistocracy seems not to be a valid alternative to democracy, the epistocratic argument against democracy remains un-

beaten. As ascertained in chapter II, the concerns regarding voters' competencies are indeed well-grounded. From this perspective, further research might focus on the development of tools and incentives, so that voters raise their awareness of political matters.

After having ascertained that the epistocratic solution seems to be unsustainable, the second research question of this thesis aims at understanding how to deal with the issue of epistocracy at school during ethics classes.

Ethics as a school subject was officially introduced in Austria in 2020. Although many schools all over the country had already introduced ethics as an alternative subject to religion, a standard curriculum for all Austrian schools was only drafted in 2019. Back to the present, the current national curriculum lists the main goals that ethics is supposed to fulfill in the following way

Ethics as a school subject is committed to fundamental human rights and freedoms. It aims at **reasoned argumentation and reflection with regard to questions of ethics and morality**. Ethics as a school subject is intended to enable pupils **to reflect autonomously** on successful ways of life, to provide them with guidance and to encourage them to engage in a well-founded discussion of basic questions of their own existence and of living together.

By confronting different philosophical, ideological, cultural, and religious traditions, as well as images of mankind and views of humanity, ethics education contributes to the development of **personality**. The aim is to strengthen **pupils' ability and willingness to respect the dignity of others, to take responsibility** for their own lives, for peaceful coexistence, and to practice an attitude of tolerance and openness to practice. Ethics classes support the pupils in dealing with their own experiences [...] and **promote autonomous and self-reflective judgment** and action. (RIS, 2022, p. 121, translated by Schininà)

It might be argued that the curriculum set the bar way too high to expect that a single subject might fulfill all of these goals successfully. In other words, one legitimate concern might regard the risk of nurturing unrealistic expectations about ethics by considering it as a sort of thaumaturgical subject.

With regard to the methods, Volker Pfeifer conceived the goal-oriented approach, according to which ethics classes should aim at enhancing the skills of pupils in four different fields: knowledge [*das Wissen*] about a specific issue, identification [*das Erkennen*] of ethical problems in daily-life situations, ability [*das Können*] to critically analyze these matters, and evaluation [*das Werten*], namely the competence of arguing, categorizing, and hierarchizing values (cf. Pfeifer, 2013, p. 72).

It may be interesting to notice that the national curriculum seems to follow a similar approach – called ‘the competencies model’ – which aims at developing the pupils’ ability to perceive different realities [*wahrnehmen*], analyze facts [*analysieren und reflektieren*], present arguments [*argumentieren*], respectfully and critically interact with others [*interagieren*], and develop solutions or perspectives [*Handlungsoptionen entwickeln*] (cf. RIS, 2022, p. 122).

Furthermore, the national curriculum puts emphasis on the dialogical dimension of ethics lessons (cf. RIS, 2022, p. 122): ethics as a school subject indeed intends to assist pupils in understanding the complexity of the world and enhancing their critical thinking skills, refusing any methodology based on indoctrination (Geister, 2002, pp. 81-85).

With regard to the topics, the national syllabus clearly states that the object of ethics classes is practical philosophy (cf. RIS, 2022, p. 121). Pupils should be encouraged to analyze the topics from an abstract, but also from a practical point of view (cf. RIS, 2022, p. 121).

In particular, over the course of a few years, pupils are called upon to confront the most diriment ethical-moral issues, such as those related to abortion and euthanasia, the relationship between human being and technology, and human being and animal, etc. The analysis of epistocracy might be embedded in a broader discussion about human rights, which should be addressed in the fifth and seventh class according to the national curriculum (cf. RIS, 2022, pp. 123-124).

In fact, voting rights are categorized as a universal human right (cf. UDHR, 1948, art. 21) and, since epistocracy questions its legitimacy, the focus on this particular right may represent the best starting point for the ethical analysis of epistocracy.

As the previous chapter showed, although the epistocratic proposal seems unsustainable for epistemological, moral, and practical reasons, the epistocratic criticism toward democracy is consistent and well-grounded. Moreover, although few people question the legitimacy of democracy, constant criticisms are directed at the negative role played by voters’ ignorance. In light of the principle of controversy [*Kontroversitätsgebot*], according to which, “what is controversial in science and politics must also appear controversial in the classroom,” (Deichmann et al., 2021, p. 10) the objections against democracy should be taken into account in order to raise pupils’ awareness about the

limits and the advantages of democracy. Consequently, the first lesson addresses how democracies can be negatively affected by voters' ignorance, while the second one aims to show (the apparent) potentialities and (the evident) limits of epistocracy. Overall, the two lessons serve to make pupils reflect on democracy, to let them think about possible alternatives, and to bring their attention to the importance of becoming competent voters.

The next section will show how epistocracy could be introduced and discussed for AHS fifth-year pupils. Preliminarily, it is worth mentioning that the didactical approach suggested here strongly relies on the dialogical dimension and pursues the enhancement of the five competencies (perception, analysis, argumentation, interaction, practical options) mentioned in the national curriculum.

4.2. *The Classroom Simulations*

4.2.1. *First lesson*

In the two weeks preceding the simulations, human rights are the subject of the sample class. In particular, the teacher introduces the topic in the first week by inviting the pupils to describe what a human right is; then, they make them reflect on how inter-related human rights and the notion of dignity are. Over the course of the second week, the teacher roughly retraces the history of human rights from Ancient Greece to the final draft of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). In the end, the first ten articles of the Declaration are analyzed and discussed in class.

Coming to the lessons relevant for this thesis, the first one concerns the relationship between democracy and in(competence). The lesson begins with a 10-minute task (s. appendix A, figure 2), in which the teacher asks his or her pupils to form groups of four people. Each group focuses on six articles of the Declaration of Human Rights² (i.e., group A analyzes the first six articles, group B focuses from article 7 to 12, etc.). What pupils are expected to do is to first read the articles assigned to their group and discuss

² The schoolbook adopted for this activity is: Bucher, Anton; Maier, Barbara; Meysel Martina; Plam-Thaler Veronika (2022): *Gemeinsam. Miteinander Toleranz, Respekt und Empathie entwickeln*, Wien: Hölzel Verlag, pp. 32-33.

which ones they found particularly relevant and why. They should decide upon two articles. At the end of the task, the teacher will ask each group to explain their choices. The division of the articles by group intends to avoid the possibility of the different teams coming up with the same answers.

The purpose of this activity does not aim at hierarchizing human rights. Rather, this introductory task only serves to refresh the topics covered in the previous lesson in an interactive way since pupils read and choose the articles and provide subjective reasons why they find two articles particularly relevant. As the national curriculum states, the ethics lessons should try to address a specific issue from several perspectives, including the subjective one (cf. RIS, 2022, p. 121). Furthermore, ethics does not only involve the objective sphere, but it is also confronted with personal emotions and subjective reasonings; thus, an ethics lesson should not ignore this component (cf. Pfeifer, 2013, pp. 242-243).

After this warm-up activity, the next 15-minute task starts with the teacher presenting article 21 of the Declaration of Human Rights concerning voting rights (s. appendix A, figure 3). At this stage, the teacher emphasizes that many eminent philosophers in the past, even in democratic Athens, contested the idea that each vote weighs the same.

Successively, pupils are asked to watch the video “Why Socrates Hated Democracy³” and to answer three questions related to it: (1) What was the discussion between Socrates and Adimantus about? (2) Which lesson did Plato draw from the process against Socrates? (3) What is the difference between an ‘intellectual democracy’ and a ‘democracy by birth-rate?’

The video was produced by the author Alain de Botton who, among other things, put effort into divulging philosophy. In particular, this video seems suitable for a fifth class, as it is short (4 minutes), entertaining, informative, and it serves as a stimulus for pupils to reflect on the main problems of democracy (cf. Pfeifer, 2013, p. 299). However, since some pupils may have troubles with English, German subtitles should be activated in order not to compromise their understanding. These three questions work as control

³ The School of Life (2016): “Why Socrates hated democracy?” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLJBzheSWTk>, accessed 15.10.2022)

questions since they summarize the main contents of the video. The questions are answered in pairs and later presented/discussed in plenum.

In the following 15 minutes, the teacher delves into certain topics of the video. This is meant to raise the pupils' awareness with regard to the relationship between democracy and incompetence. In particular, the teacher mentions the Platonic notion of 'philosopher-king' in order to underline that, according to Plato, (1) only knowledgeable people (the philosophers) should rule; (2) ordinary people have no competencies to make wise decisions. By the same token, a historical contextualization of the recklessness of Athenians citizens with regard to the Syracuse campaign will help emphasize how the incompetence of voters marked the decline of the Greek Polis. In the end, the concept of demagoguery is introduced to demonstrate the fact that even modern democracies can be harmed by it (e.g., the disinformation campaign played a role in the Brexit campaign, as ascertained in the second chapter).

In the final 10 minutes, the teacher invites the pupils to form groups of four and to reflect upon this question: "assuming that the incompetence of voters is a problem for democracy, which initiatives or solutions could combat it? Justify your answer" (s. appendix A, figure 6). Discussions about one specific topic represent an essential tool in ethics and philosophy classes since pupils can enhance their analytical skills by virtue of the insights coming from other pupils and the teacher (cf. Pfeifer, 2013, p. 117-123).

It is reasonable to assume that many possible answers in the plenum could point out that a better education, better media and the personal responsibility of being informed voters could represent a possible solution. Thus, the formulation of this question aims at highlighting that every citizen plays a role in a democracy.

In conclusion, the first class is intended to make pupils conscious of the problem of incompetence in democracies. Furthermore, all the competencies mentioned in the national curriculum, namely, to lead pupils to discover new points of view and to reflect upon them, to critically analyze ethical issues, to discuss them in a respectful way, and to try to formulate possible solutions are involved (cf. RIS, 2022, p. 122).

4.2.2. *Second lesson*

While the first lesson analyzes the relationship between competence and democracy, the second lesson focuses on epistocracy. Consequently, the teacher introduces the system elaborated by Jason Brennan in the first 10 minutes by arguing that, according to the latter, epistocracy would solve the incompetence problem that affects democracies. In particular, the teacher focuses on three aspects of the epistocratic theory, namely the categories of voters, the idea that voting should be considered a license rather than a human right, and the description of the three epistocratic tenets (s. appendix A, figures 8, 9, 10).

The core of this lesson consists in a pro-contra debate about epistocracy. However, in order to make the discussion successful, it is fundamental to first design a preparatory task that allows pupils to be prepared for the successive discussion (cf. Montag in Nida-Rümelin et al., 2017, pp. 204). Consequently, the next 25 minutes are divided into a 10 minute brainstorming task, in which students can gather their ideas, and a 15 minute debate in plenum.

Concerning the brainstorming task, pupils are divided into groups of four. Assuming that the class is composed of 24 pupils, three groups will list reasons why epistocracy is better than democracy; the other three groups will focus on the contrasts and dangers of epistocracy (s. appendix A, figure 11). In order to stimulate their creativity and help them organize their thoughts, the teacher gives each group one sheet of paper where they can list pros and cons of epistocracy. In any case, the teacher supervises the group discussions and tries to give new insights to the pupils in order to favor a productive dialogue.

In the following 15 minutes, the pro contra discussion takes place. Pupils pretend to be guests of a famous Austrian talk show, and they are called upon to discuss whether epistocracy is a reasonable alternative to democracy (s. appendix A, figure 12). Although the object of the pro contra discussion is the same as the one covered in the brainstorming activity, the challenge is different. In fact, while the brainstorming activity is designed to help pupils form opinions to use in the discussion, the debate allows them to broaden their analysis by discovering opposing ideas. After all, the debate in the ethics lessons should primarily pursue a deeper understanding of the topic analyzed (cf. Montag in Nida-Rümelin et al., 2017, p. 203).

The teacher briefly introduces the rules, which are inspired by so-called American debate, in which two or more groups alternately present their arguments and raise objections in a defined period of time (cf. Montag in Nida-Rümelin et al., 2017, pp. 199). In this simulation, it is assumed that the sample class is composed of 24 pupils, and that they are divided into six groups of four. Three groups must find reasons in favor of epistocracy while the other groups list arguments against it. Consequently, the debate is structured into three rounds: in the first round, one of the three groups in favor of epistocracy commences the debate by arguing why epistocracy is an admissible solution. Then, one of the three groups opposing epistocracy replies by raising objections. The second round follows the same schema, with the only difference being that the groups arguing change: namely, the second of the three pro-epistocracy groups present new arguments, and so does the second group contesting the validity of the epistocratic account. The same applies for the third round. In other words, the discussion works by alternating between the pro-epistocracy and anti-epistocracy groups for two minutes each.

The success of the pro-contra discussion depends on the teacher to a considerable extent: in fact, he or she must guarantee that the pupils: (1) are engaged in the discussion, (2) interact peacefully, and (3) argue rationally. Moreover, it seems likely to assume that the teacher may sometimes interrupt the discussion to paraphrase, clarify, or correct some arguments that arise in the debate.

The pro contra debate is a suitable didactic methodology for ethics lessons for several reasons: first of all, pupils learn to identify, articulate, and confront their ideas (cf. Montag in Nida-Rümelin et al., 2017, pp. 198) and to interact with each other in a respectful way (cf. Scholz, 2018, p. 30). In other words, the pro contra discussion represents the first step to make pupils confident with critically analyzing arguments and communicating their ideas in a clear and persuasive way (cf. Pfeifer, 2013, pp. 198 – 200).

In order to make the pro/contra discussion more amusing for the pupils, allowing them to imagine themselves as important people invited to express their opinions on an Austrian talk-show, is a didactical strategy that makes the debate more entertaining and, potentially, more effective. In fact, the contextualization of the debate may create a ludic atmosphere which, in turn, may lead to more natural conversations between the pupils. It

should not be forgotten that the creation of scenarios can be a good exercise, as it stimulates pupils' imagination, an important resource to be utilized (Engels, 2004, cf. 17-18).

In the remaining 15 minutes, the teacher briefly summarizes the arguments brought up in the discussion and mentions some possible arguments that have not been raised. For instance, the demographic objection, the most effective argument against epistocracy, may not arise in the debate, and the same applies to certain historical examples showing how an epistocratic system could be easily manipulated (s. appendix A, figure 13).

As a post-task, the teacher invites the pupils to answer one of the two questions at home: in the first one, pupils argue which system between epistocracy or democracy; should be preferred and why; in the second question, pupils explain to Brigitte and Ulrich (invented names) how to become competent voters (s. appendix A, figure 14).

The purpose of these tasks is threefold. With regard to the first question, it is important that pupils learn how to argue in a formal way. In fact, supporting a point of view in a debate and forming arguments in writing require two different argumentative skills that are important to master (cf. Luft, 2018, pp. 125-126). To teach this ability is also coherent with the purposes of the national curriculum that supports the improvement of pupils' arguing skills (cf. RIS, 2022, p. 122).

The purpose of the second question is to make pupils reflect upon the concrete possibilities that they have to become competent voters (cf. Scholz, 2018, p. 60). This question affects the practical sphere and aims at fostering the fifth competence indicated in the national curriculum [*Handlungsoptionen entwickeln*] (cf. RIS, 2022, p. 122). In the end, these questions allow pupils to think about the topics discussed in the last two classes in a more reflective way since they need to take time to write their thoughts.

At the beginning of the next lesson, the teacher spends the first 20 minutes exchanging opinions with the pupils about the last two lessons. This activity may be useful to clarify some possible concepts/doubts of the pupils and get some pupils' feedback concerning their interest in this non-conventional topic.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this master's thesis was twofold. First, this work aimed at ascertaining whether epistocracy may be considered a better political system than democracy by analyzing the validity of its tenets and verifying how this system might be implemented. Secondly, coherently with the didactic purposes pursued in the previous chapter, it asked how the issue of epistocracy could be taught at school in the context of ethics lessons for AHS fifth-year pupils.

The first chapter of the thesis focused on the main criticisms raised against democracy by eminent philosophers over time. While Plato formulated his concerns from an aristocratic standpoint, Tocqueville and Mill supported democracy but were wary of its possible degenerations. In particular, Tocqueville warned against the risk of seeing democracy transformed into a tyranny of majority; on the other hand, Mill observed that masses might not be able to make good political decisions, endorsing a voting system in which the vote of educated people weighs more than that of ordinary people. Jason Brennan formally conceived this concept in 2016 and argued that the adoption of epistocratic principles might solve the problem of being ruled by incompetent and irrational voters.

The second chapter took voter behavior into account to verify whether the average voter is actually as ignorant and irrational as the philosophers previously assumed. Unfortunately, the outcomes are not encouraging. With regard to their political expertise, many surveys suggest that the average voter lacks considerable political knowledge. Paradigmatically, an IPSOS study conducted in western countries showed that the average voter tends to have political opinions that are barely supported by facts (cf. IPSOS Mori, 2017). With regard to voter behavior, a considerable number of studies have demonstrated how voters tend to be more driven by political tribalism, political biases and to be subject to the polarization phenomena rather than critical thinking and objectivity. Additionally, the brief analysis concerning the Brexit referendum showed how the misinformation of voters was a crucial factor in the referendum's outcome. In light of surveys, studies, experiments, and practical examples, it must be concluded that the average voter is not particularly competent or rational.

The third chapter focused on epistocracy from a systematic point of view. First, Brennan's epistocratic theory has been analyzed as relying on three main tenets and a main argument. Secondly, these three main tenets have been criticized in different respects.

The first main tenet on which epistocracy relies is the so-called "truth tenet". It states that, "there are correct answers to (at least some) political questions." (Brennan, 2016, p. 17) With regard to this, the strongest objection consists in pointing out that there are no certain political answers to complex political problems, as Brennan assumes. Economics represents a good example, as different schools of thought continue to argue about which policies might be more effective for increasing employment and guaranteeing GDP growth. In light of this, assuming that social sciences can provide solutions to any kind of political issue denotes a rather naïve idea of how complex real-world phenomena may be.

The first main tenet on which epistocracy relies is the so-called "knowledge tenet". It states that, "some citizens know more of these truths or are more reliable at determining these truths than others." (Brennan, 2016, p. 17) As far as this tenet is concerned, empirical studies show that, despite the opinions of experts being valuable, they may be mistaken for a layperson's. Arguing that there are some people who are more aware of political truths than others is true, but it does not imply an endorsement of epistocracy. In fact, it is unclear on which basis the voting rights of 'incompetent' people should be limited if even competent people blunder.

Concerning the anti-authority tenet, many objections were raised, but the most effective one is the demographic objection. This argues that an epistocratic system would implicitly disenfranchise the most disadvantaged classes, which tend to be the less educated. Moreover, allowing only competent people to vote does not imply that these voters will vote in the name of the common good. On the contrary, it can be assumed that they might pursue their own interests. As a result, the question of whom might represent the disenfranchised social classes in an epistocratic system remains unsolved. Furthermore, history has already shown that any kind of literacy tests, far from testing voters' competence, were often utilized to disenfranchise specific categories of people (e.g., people of color).

More generally, while epistocracy aims to limit the impact of incompetent voters, it fails to explain who the competent voters are, on which criteria they should be chosen,

which competencies are needed to critically identify a good policy and, consequently, to understand what the good in the political field means.

In light of the foregoing, it must be concluded that the epistocratic proposal is inadmissible because of its controversial principles and the difficulties and dangers related to its implementation. Hence, the answer to the first research question is negative: epistocracy cannot be considered an acceptable alternative to democracy for epistemological, moral, and practical reasons. On the other hand, the epistocratic argument against democracy remains undefeated as concerns regarding voters' lack of preparation are well-grounded. Consequently, further research may focus on the development of strategies to raise voters' competencies in political matters.

The final chapter focused on the second research question, namely how epistocracy could be addressed at school. On account of the complexity and depth of the topic, two lessons were suggested. The first one focused on the role played by incompetence in democracies, allowing pupils to be smoothly introduced to the most important epistocratic argument against democracy. The second lesson addressed Brennan's epistocratic theory and was articulated in a set of tasks aimed at enhancing, among other things, the analytical, argumentative, and interacting skills of pupils, in accordance with the goals mentioned in the Austrian national curriculum.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A – Slides



Figure 1

WIEDERHOLUNG

Lest den Text zur *Allgemeinen Erklärung der Menschenrechte*. Wählt dann in kleinen Gruppen drei Artikel, die ihr besonders relevant findet. Begründet eure Auswahl im Anschluss im Plenum.

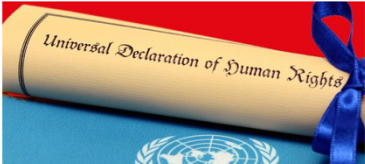


Figure 2

ARTIKEL 21

1. Jeder hat das Recht, an der Gestaltung der öffentlichen Angelegenheiten seines Landes unmittelbar oder durch frei gewählte Vertreter mitzuwirken.
2. Jeder hat das Recht auf gleichen Zugang zu öffentlichen Ämtern in seinem Lande.
3. Der Wille des Volkes bildet die Grundlage für die Autorität der öffentlichen Gewalt; dieser Wille muß durch regelmäßige, unverfälschte, **allgemeine und gleiche Wahlen mit geheimer Stimmabgabe oder in einem gleichwertigen freien Wahlverfahren zum Ausdruck kommen.**

Allgemeine Erklärung der Menschenrechte, 1948

Figure 3

AUFGABE: SCHAUT EUCH DAS VIDEO AN AND BEANTWORTET DIE FOLGENDEN FRAGEN

- 1) Worum ging es in der Diskussion zwischen Sokrates und Adeimantos?
- 2) Welche Lehre zog Platon aus dem Prozess gegen Sokrates?
- 3) Was ist der Unterschied zwischen einer „intellektuellen Demokratie“ und einer „Demokratie per Geburtsrecht“?

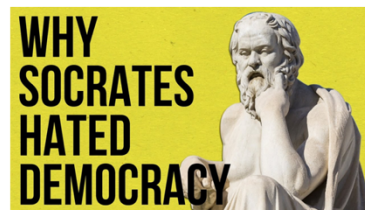


Figure 4

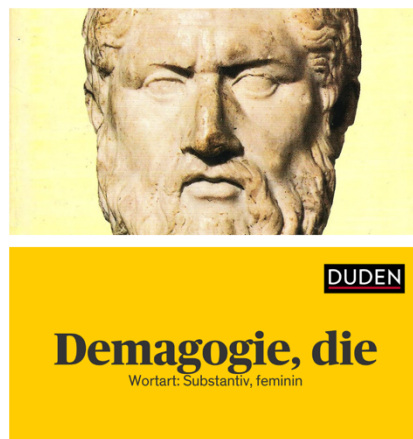
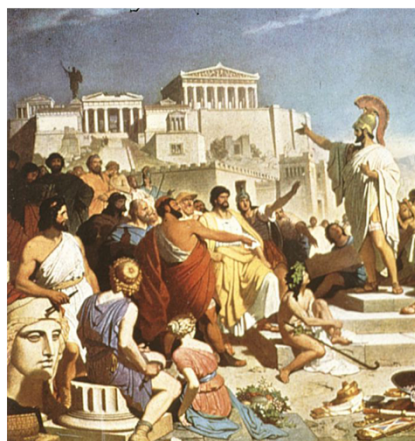
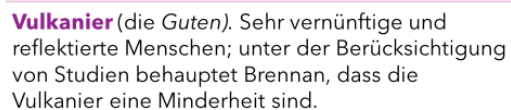
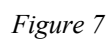


Figure 5

[illegible]

Figure 6



83

WAHLRECHT WIE EIN FÜHRERSCHEIN

Anstatt zu denken, das aktive und passive Wahlrecht sei Ausdruck einer beschränkten Majestät oder diese politischen Rechte seien Symbole der Mitgliedschaft im nationalen Club, würden die Menschen diese Rechte lediglich als Lizenzen betrachten, die sich nicht vom Führerschein oder von einer Zulassung zum Friseur oder Installateur unterscheiden

(Brennan, 2017, S. 129)



Figure 9

EPISTOKRATISCHE PRINZIPIEN

- **Postulat der Wahrheit:** Es gibt richtige Antworten auf politische Fragen (oder zumindest auf einen Teil davon).
- **Postulat des Wissens:** Einige Bürger kennen diese Wahrheit besser als andere oder sind besser geeignet, sie zu erkennen.
- **Antiautoritätspostulat:** Wenn einige Bürger moralisch unvernünftig, unwissend oder politisch inkompetent sind, ist dies ein ausreichender Grund, ihnen *nicht* zu erlauben, politische Autorität über andere auszuüben“

(Brennan, 2017, S. 17)

Figure 10

BRAINSTORMING

Bildet kleine Gruppen. Die Hälfte der Gruppen beschäftigt sich damit, Argumente zu überlegen, die für die Epistokratie als valide Alternative zur Demokratie sprechen. Die andere Hälfte der Gruppen kümmert sich darum, Argumente gegen die Epistokratie auszuarbeiten.

Beispiel:

- In einer Epistokratie werden bessere Entscheidungen getroffen, weil....
- In einer Epistokratie dürfen nur wenige Menschen wählen. Das ist schlecht, weil....



Figure 11

PRO UND KONTRA DISKUSSION

- Stellt euch vor, dass ihr Gäste in der *Zeit im Bild 2* auf ORF 2 seid. In der Diskussion geht es darum, ob die Epistokratie eine vernünftige Alternative zur Demokratie darstellen kann.
- Die Diskussion läuft folgendermaßen ab: Eine Gruppe pro-Epistokratie fängt an, zu argumentieren. Dann ist eine Gruppe gegen-Epistokratie dran, um Einwände und Argumente einzubringen. Die Lehrperson ist der Moderator.



Figure 12

MÖGLICHE EINWÄNDE GEGEN EINE EPISTOKRATIE

- **Demographischer Einwand: Epistokratie als Strafe**
- Es gibt eine Verbindung zwischen Bildungsniveau und Wohlstand innerhalb einer Gesellschaft. Wenn das Wahlrecht vom Bestehen einer Prüfung zu Wirtschafts- und Politikwissenschaften abhängt, ist es sehr wahrscheinlich, dass benachteiligte gesellschaftliche Gruppen eher nicht wählen dürfen (Estlund, 2008).
- **Manipulierbarkeit der Epistokratie: eine Lektion aus der Geschichte**
- In den USA gab es viele Literacy-Tests, die eigentlich darauf abzielten, die afroamerikanische Bevölkerung von der politischen Mitbestimmung auszuschließen (Klocksien, 2019).

Figure 13

HAUSAUFGABE

1) Welches System haltet ihr für sinnvoller – die Demokratie oder die Epistokratie? Warum?

2) Stellt euch vor, dass Brigitte und Ulrich euch fragen, wie man zu kompetenten Wähler:innen wird. Gebt ihnen praktische Empfehlungen!



Figure 14

Appendix B – Lesson Plans

Lesson Plan of the First Class

Time	Activity	Social interaction	Material
1. – 10.	Warm-up activity: in groups of four, pupils read pp. 32-33, where the articles of the <i>Declaration of Human Rights</i> are listed. Pupils choose two articles that they find particularly relevant. They will explain their choices in plenum.	Group activity	School book
10. – 25.	The teacher introduces article no. 21 of the <i>Declaration</i>. Then, pupils watch the video “Why Socrates hated Democracy” and, in pairs, answer three questions: - What was the discussion between Plato and Adimantus about? - Which lesson did Plato draw from the process against Socrates? - What is the difference between an <i>intellectual democracy</i> and a <i>democracy by birthrate</i>?	Individual and pair activity	Video and slides
25. – 40.	The teacher explains some topics of the video in-depth, focusing on the Platonian idea of the “philosopher-kings” and certain historical details about the Syracuse Campaign. Finally, the relationship between voters’ incompetence and demagogy will be taken into account.	Front-of-class teaching	Slides
40. – 50.	Pupils reflect upon the following question in small groups: <i>assuming that the incompetence of voters is a problem for democracy, which initiatives or solutions could counter it? Justify your answer.</i> The answers will be briefly listed in plenum.	Group activity	Slides

Lesson Plan of the Second Class

Time	Activity	Social interaction	Material
1. – 10.	Explanation of epistocracy. In particular, the following concepts will be addressed: - The three types of voters according to Brennan (Hobbit, Hooligan, Vulcan) - Voting rights as a license - The three epistocratic tenets	Front-of-class teaching	Slides
10. – 20.	Brainstorming task. Pupils are divided into small groups. Some groups must list reasons why epistocracy is a valid alternative to democracy; the other groups focus on the cons of this system. The teacher supervises the discussions.	Group discussion	Worksheets
20. – 35.	Pros and cons debate: imaging themselves to be guests on a famous Austrian talk show, the pupils discuss why epistocracy is (or is not) a valid alternative to democracy. The teacher anchors the discussion.	Class discussion	Worksheets
35. – 50.	The teacher summarizes the main arguments discussed during the debate and presents further objections that have not been addressed so far.	Front-of-class teaching	Slides

Appendix C – Abstracts

English: In 2016, Jason Brennan sparked a philosophical debate by questioning the legitimacy and effectiveness of democracy. According to him, the rise of populist movements in many western countries demonstrates that democracies are increasingly weakened by the incompetence of their voters as they tend to endorse controversial candidates and their ideas for political change. That being the case, Brennan suggested the adoption of epistocracy, a system that only intends for competent people to rule. Although several epistocratic models have been theorized, all of them aim at reducing the weight of so-called incompetent voters. In this thesis, I will analyze the main arguments behind the epistocratic account and focus on the admissibility of three epistocratic tenets on the basis of epistemological, practical, and moral considerations. Albeit the idea behind epistocracy may be appealing, its potential implementation seems difficult to realize as (1) it is unclear which competencies would be needed to define a competent voter; (2) there are no reasonable selection criteria to determine the competence of voters; (3) reducing the rights of incompetent voters would probably lead to disenfranchising the most disadvantaged of social classes, creating an aristocracy in disguise. Besides engaging in a philosophical discourse, this thesis also pursues a didactical goal: its last part deals with how epistocracy could be approached in the classroom during ethics lessons at Austrian schools.

Keywords: epistocracy, Jason Brennan, truth tenet, knowledge tenet, anti-authority tenet, incompetence of voters, demographic objection.

Deutsch: Im Jahr 2016 löste Jason Brennan eine philosophische Debatte aus, indem er die Legitimität und Wirksamkeit der Demokratie in Frage stellte. Seines Erachtens zeigt der Aufstieg populistischer Bewegungen in vielen westlichen Ländern, dass Demokratien zunehmend durch die Inkompetenz ihrer Wähler:innen geschwächt werden, da diese dazu neigen, kontroverse Kandidat:innen und deren Ideen für einen politischen Wandel zu unterstützen. Aus diesem Grund schlug Brennan die Einführung der Epistokratie vor, eines Systems, in dem nur kompetente Menschen regieren sollen. Obwohl zu mehreren epistokratischen Modellen Theorien entwickelt wurden, zielen alle darauf ab, den Einfluss sogenannter inkompetenter Wähler:innen zu verringern. In dieser Masterarbeit analysiere ich die Hauptargumente der Epistokratie und ich konzentriere mich auf die Zulässigkeit von drei epistokratischen Grundsätzen anhand erkenntnistheoretischer, praktischer und moralischer Überlegungen. Während die Idee der Epistokratie zwar ansprechend wirken mag, könnte sich ihre mögliche Umsetzung jedoch als schwierig erweisen, da (1) unklar ist, welche Kompetenzen erforderlich wären, um kompetente Wähler:innen als solche zu definieren; (2) es keine vernünftigen Auswahlkriterien gibt, um die Kompetenz von Wähler:innen zu bestimmen; (3) die Einschränkung der Rechte inkompetenter Wähler:innen wahrscheinlich dazu führen würde, dass die am stärksten benachteiligten sozialen Schichten entrechtet werden würden, wodurch eine verkappte Aristokratie entstünde. Neben dem philosophischen Diskurs verfolgt diese Arbeit auch ein didaktisches Ziel; so geht es im letzten Teil darum, wie das Thema Epistokratie im Ethikunterricht an österreichischen Schulen behandelt werden könnte.