



The Demographic Objection and the Limits of Competence

Samuel Granholm

Uppsats:	Kandidatuppsats 15 hp
Program and/or course:	Fördjupningskursen i praktisk filosofi
Term/year:	Hösttermin 2023
Supervisor:	Alexander Andersson
Examiner:	Ragnar Francén

Abstract: Epistocrats argue that political power should be distributed according to competence. Under universal suffrage the electorate at any given election will be comprised of both competent and incompetent voters due to varying degrees of knowledge and rationality within the polity. Jason Brennan argues that by excluding politically ignorant citizens from voting, the remaining electorate will be more competent in electing governments which will produce political outcomes that serve the nation better than democracy does. However, being politically well-informed is likely to correspond with being well-educated which in turn is likely to correspond with being privileged. Since access to education is not equally distributed in society, limiting voting rights on this basis may effectively exclude groups of already marginalized citizens, whose knowledge might be invaluable to address current issues of justice. Furthermore, while education has its epistemic benefits, it is not clear that it will all-things-considered lead one to make better and less biased political decisions. I will argue that the losses of disenfranchising uneducated demographic groups are greater than its epistemic benefits.

1. Introduction

Are there reasonable grounds for conditioning voting rights based on political competence? Jason Brennan argues there are. As an advocate of epistocracy¹, he claims that if we make sure that the electorate is more competent, it will elect politicians who will make and implement laws that produce better political outcomes, in virtue of the epistemic benefits of knowledge. In his paper *The Right to a Competent Electorate* he proposes to exclude the least competent voters by a politics exam prior to voting, creating a *restricted suffrage*.² Some democrats, like Estlund, worry that despite the epistemic benefits of education any citizen may have a number of epistemically damaging features that would be disproportionately favored if this group has more political influence. Others, like Landemore, are concerned that disenfranchising citizens on the basis of education undervalues their perspective and the knowledge they have acquired through experience, implying that it is not only education that matters in combating social injustice. These concerns aim to highlight that even though there

¹ Epistocracy is translated to *rule of the wise* from the Greek word for knowledge, *epistēmē*.

² Other ideas of how to improve electoral decisions have been proposed based on epistocratic concerns. For example, Christiano (2008) has proposed an enfranchisement lottery, where a random subset of the population is selected and then politically educated as to be able to cast an informed vote. This is a measure that aims to counteract the fact that a minority may lack practical influence over elections due to lack of numbers compared to the majority as well as citizens' varying lack of political competence.

are admitted benefits of education, dividing political power along these lines will have downsides that call into question the epistocratic claim of producing better political results.

Most people agree that there is quite some variation between citizens' understanding of politics. Estlund (2003:61) suggests that, other things equal, a polity with a higher education would make better political decisions than a polity with less or no education. It seems to be a small step accepting that some people would in fact rule more wisely and arguing that since they would rule more wisely they also should rule. Epistocrats question whether the relations like political equality can justify giving the incompetent and misinformed voters the responsibility to partake in building our common society. You wouldn't ask the cook how to navigate the ship; you'd ask the captain.

Brennan (2011:700) sees himself as an innocent person subjected to rulers elected based on incompetent decisions. Research on voter behavior suggests that voters in general tend to know very little about politics and make irrational decisions based on feelings and biases (Brennan 2011:722). As a rational and knowledgeable person, why should he be subjected to their ill-informed wills? If we can all agree that some citizens know more about politics, why shouldn't this be a criteria that plays into who gets to vote? After all, in a democracy we already accept the age restrictions for young citizens grounded in their lack of competence, despite the fact that some seventeen year old citizens will tend to be much better informed and rational about politics than some twenty year old citizens.

1.1 Disposition

I will put Brennan's epistocracy under restricted suffrage to test in light of *the demographic objection to epistocracy*. The demographic objection is a challenge against any political system that weighs voters' political power in relation to their political competence, level of education, social merit or some other form of criteria of virtuousness. It aims to highlight aspects of an individual which may counteract the benefits of knowledge received, like how networks of biases influence behavior and how ideological ideas can travel through the education system without necessarily being noticed. Institutionalized discrimination, epistemic injustice³ and patterns of arrogance can build up in social elites. Regardless of one's level of political competence each individual is biased⁴ based on specifics of their lives.

³ Miranda Fricker (2007)

⁴ As noted by Peters (2019:395) in *Implicit bias, ideological bias, and epistemic risks in philosophy*, in general biases have a negative connotation but can have epistemic and ethical benefits. For example, being biased against extremist right-wing ideology may be seen as having an ethical benefit.

Factors like race, class and gender will play a big part in how one perceives the world and what one desires it to become. According to Estlund (2003:61-65), the demographic objection is concerned with the fact that even though education has epistemic benefits for political decision-making there is reason to suspect that (1) epistemically disadvantageous characteristics may travel with the privileged, and (2) sharing demographic factor entails sharing preferences and biases that will be disproportionately favored compared to the preferences and biases of the disenfranchised. Having political knowledge is in part a matter of having access to education and it will be crucial in acquiring the political knowledge one would have to demonstrate under restricted suffrage. Yet, society's resources are unequally distributed and people living in socially vulnerable areas have less favorable circumstances for acquiring education. If in turn being well-educated is a de facto requisite to be able to pass a voting test, this will marginalize already vulnerable people. And, according to Landmore (2021:205), this marginalization of certain demographics will lead to epistemic losses since they possess experiential knowledge one cannot simply acquire by theoretical studies. Epistocracy's claim to fame is the epistemic benefits resulting from competence determining political power. If Estlund and Landmore are correct, the demographic objection poses a difficult challenge for the veracity of this claim.

In part two I will explain Brennan's conception of epistocracy under restricted suffrage. For example, what kind of competence Brennan is looking for, how raising an electorate competence might be achieved and why this is desirable. This part will examine arguments for epistocracy in general and restricted suffrage in particular. Part three will first explore the demographic objection as proposed by Estlund and then variations of it supported by arguments from Landmore and others. I believe the demographic objection emerges in this debate in several guises and it may be clarifying to spell out its width. The demographic objection aims to challenge the epistemic consequences proposed to result from restricted suffrage or other epistocratic systems. In his paper *Does the Demographic Objection Succeed?* (2018) Brennan argues that the demographic objection against restricted suffrage is at best much weaker than democrats seem to think. Part four will describe and evaluate Brennan's counter arguments to the demographic objection. Part five will summarize the discussion with a short overview of my findings.

2. Epistocracy and Restricted Suffrage

Democracy under universal suffrage implies that every citizen within the democratic state gets to vote in elections if they so choose.⁵ It is a method of collective decision-making where political equality among citizens plays an essential part. Yet, it is *conditional* on voting rights laws which set certain limitations on who gets to vote. For example, in Sweden you have to be a registered citizen of 18 years old and in the US you have to register to vote prior to actually voting and may lose your voting rights if you have been incarcerated. Voting age laws are justified on the idea that, in general, a person below a certain age is not competent enough to exercise political power. Since competence already acts as a bar of entry for voting, Brennan's idea is to take this further by restricting suffrage for all incompetent voters, regardless of age.

2.1 Restricted suffrage

Brennan (2011:701) explains that “[b]roadly speaking, a polity is epistocratic to the extent that knowledge and competence are legal requirements for holding political power.” Within this spectrum epistocracy may take many forms which I will not be able to cover exhaustively. However, traditional epistocracy argues that political power should be the privilege of a specialized elite. One famous conception of epistocracy is found in Plato's *Republic* where he argues for a strict hierarchical society, ruled by arduously trained philosophers. In *The China Model*, Bell (2015) argues that China is a meritocracy, where politicians have to prove themselves on lower levels of the political system to eventually rise in ranks.⁶ Meritocracy and epistocracy are not strictly synonyms. The former supposes that those with the most merit in the field ought to rule, it is not enough to be wise. But perhaps wisdom presupposes merit. Nevertheless, they both rely on the instrumental argument that if we make sure that power is concentrated to a political elite, which excels in its field, and can rule with little or no influence from the general public, this will produce better political outcomes.

Brennan's restricted suffrage aims to reap the benefits of democratic elections while avoiding the unwanted consequences of incompetent voters' influence. Instead of political

⁵ There are also compulsory voting regimes, for example Australia, where every eligible voter is required by law to vote (Brennan, 2018:68).

⁶ The Chinese political system lacks democratic elections but CCP consults the public on political issues through the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). (Wikipedia 2023)

power solely residing with a political elite which lacks democratic accountability, a sufficiently well-informed or reasonable elite electorate would decide elections. And, by restricting misinformed input at the electoral stage the epistemic quality of elections would be improved. This is important since, apart from being ignorant, misinformed and irrational, many voters are either indifferent to politics or highly biased in favor of their own political team (Brennan, 2016:24). The indifferent voters do not care enough to become well-informed and the so-called hooligans⁷ process information in a skewed way. In contrast, the competent voter is someone that is politically well-informed, and makes rational decisions based on this knowledge. Furthermore, her decisions ought to be morally reasonable but the question of what this means is left open as a variable to be filled in with the truth of the issue at hand (Brennan 2011:705). In order to be well-informed, citizens have to know what policies candidates support, how they have acted in the past and how it is likely that they will act in the future, as well as, determining if these future acts are likely to align with the citizen's preferences (Brennan 2016:28). To understand this properly one needs knowledge of economics and social sciences. While some have extensive knowledge of this kind, most unfortunately have not and it seems to be quite stable over time (Brennan 2016:30).

Brennan (2011:714) proposes that voter competence is tested via an exam. The voting exam is meant to test the voter on important knowledge which would make it more probable that she casts an informed vote. If each election corresponds with an exam then a voter who fails a specific election might not be indefinitely disenfranchised as long as she can educate herself in order to pass in the future (Brennan 2011:719). The exam could be built off already existing institutions like the ANES⁸ or the citizenship exam⁹ (Brennan 2016:212). The ANES and citizenship exam could act like guidelines for what kind of knowledge might be required under restricted suffrage, such as knowing what kind of policies Republicans support. There might still be questions of what kind of knowledge is desirable and how to make sure that the test-makers are in turn competent and morally reasonable but it is beyond the scope of this paper to thoroughly examine this issue further.

⁷ A hooligan is Brennan's own term for a specific kind of voter: "*Hooligans* are the rabid sports fans of politics. They have strong and largely fixed worldviews. They can present arguments for their beliefs, but they cannot explain alternative points of view in a way that people with other views would find satisfactory." (Brennan 2016:5)

⁸ ANES stands for American National Election Studies and "produces high quality data from its own surveys on voting, public opinion, and political participation." (ANES, n.d)

⁹ The US citizenship exam tests migrants on their skills in English and civics, like American history and how the government works. (US Citizenship and Immigration Services, n.d)

2.2 Arguments for restricted suffrage

Brennan makes four claims in favor of restricted suffrage. First, he claims that under universal suffrage a right not to be subjected to an incompetent decision-making body is violated. Secondly, he claims that restricted suffrage would raise electoral competence in two ways: by excluding those who are incompetent and incentivising citizens to obtain political knowledge. His third argument aims to show that when a voter understands which policies are likely to lead to which political outcomes, she will be able to cast an informed vote where her political preferences are accurately executed. Finally, research on voter behavior shows that voters tend to vote in what they perceive to be the common good, which suggests that if they become more competent they will vote for policies that are in the interest of the common good with higher accuracy.

2.2.1 The competence principle and jury-analogy

Brennan (2011:704) postulates that a political decision made by an incompetent and/or morally unreasonable deliberative body violates *the competence principle*. The competence principle states that citizens should not have their life prospects and liberties infringed upon by a government which is put in power by an incompetent electorate. Unfortunately, citizens tend to be ignorant and irrational about politics (Brennan 2011:700; Brennan 2016:24). Therefore, under universal suffrage a citizen's right "not to be subject to high stakes decisions made by incompetent and morally unreasonable people" is violated (Brennan, 2011:702).

The issue for Brennan is that every vote corresponds to some political power that when aggregated elects our government. The elected government will make and implement policies that affect everyone's lives within it. Government decisions are enforced by violence, or threat thereof, and determines our rights and duties. Brennan (2011:703) makes an analogy to the US jury system. If one was standing on trial for a crime and the decision about one's freedom and life prospects were decided by a jury that was either poorly informed, or could not make rational decision based on the evidence, or simply decided one's culpability on a morally arbitrary reason, like skin color, that decision would be unjust. By the same notion, if a citizen's life prospects and liberties were decided on by an electorate that is poorly informed, irrational or morally unreasonable this is unjust towards the citizen. I take Brennan to believe that a politics exam would counteract this injustice by weeding out severely misinformed and ignorant voters.

2.2.2 Raising competence

A voting exam is proposed to raise competence in two ways. First, by weeding out the most politically illiterate, raising the competence median of the new restricted electorate and second, by giving voters incentive to make sure they have the requisite competence to be allowed to vote. Brennan (2016:30) highlights that since 1940 the percentage holding a high school diploma has risen from 30% to 80% in the US. Despite this, political ignorance is stable. Brennan (2016:31) concludes that this is a matter of *rational ignorance* since acquiring the information in order to cast an informed vote exceeds the perceived benefits of voting. He believes that voters understand that the difference one vote makes in isolation is in most cases negligible because it will statistically not change the outcome of an election and this incentivizes voters to remain ignorant. As Brennan (2016:24) puts it, people are ignorant about politics because “when it comes to voting, knowledge and rationality do not pay, while ignorance and irrationality go unpunished.” Knowledge and rationality might not pay in regards to the single vote in isolation. Yet, as Brennan (2016:35) points out, social belonging might demand that one has a political standpoint (that aligns with the majority view of the group) and many people report to believe voting is a moral duty. Additionally, research on voter behavior asserts that we vote in what we perceive to be in the nation’s interest (Brennan 2016:50). If voters perceive it to be a moral duty to vote altruistically this will at least partly motivate them to vote. And, knowing what one’s social circle believes (and potentially demands of one to believe) will likely influence how one decides to vote. But the fact that ignorance and irrationality go unpunished allows for all the benefits of these factors to be canceled out. A voter may be systematically misinformed without knowing so and perceive it is her moral duty to vote for the benefit of other people with the result that her altruistic act misses the mark. However, under restricted suffrage this misinformation would not go unpunished because she would lose her vote if she fails the test. I believe Brennan would argue that if she does obtain the right kind of knowledge, society will benefit from her new epistemic resources and if she doesn’t society will not suffer from her epistemic failings. It is a win-win situation.

2.2.3 The argument from better results

The consequentialist argument for epistocracy is that with better knowledge, rationality and moral character at the decision-making stage, better results will follow. Brennan (2011:723) argues that there are reasons to predict that the epistemic benefits of a restricted electorate

would yield better political results than universal suffrage does. Voters who pass would be better informed on the circumstances of their country's political situation and this might reduce the discrepancy between *policy preferences* and *outcome preferences*. Policy preferences are the political means a voter prefers, given her beliefs on what outcomes these means will likely lead to, while outcome preferences are her desired political ends. Brennan (2018:64) writes that a rational voter would form a policy preference because she believes that this policy will have the political outcome she prefers. If voters are better informed on which policies are likely to produce specific results they might be able to make more informed decisions when voting – decisions aligned with their actual preferences. And since they are better informed they might be less inclined to fall prey to demagogues and populist propaganda. For example, Brennan (2021:95) suggests that during the EU Referendum in the UK it is likely that if people were better informed they would have voted to remain in the EU. Testing voters on EU knowledge before voting would have made it more clear that voters understood such things as the pros and cons of EU membership and the consequences of leaving the EU. According to the statistics website, *Statista Research Department* (2016), young voters with higher education were overrepresented in wanting to remain in the EU.¹⁰ An exclusion of the least informed (uneducated) 5% of the voter base would likely have led to the UK remaining in the EU.¹¹

Brennan supports this argument with research that shows that information changes policy preferences. Brennan (2018:65) states that poorly informed people, after correcting for demographic factors, are “more in favor of protectionism, abortion restrictions, harsh penalties on crime, doing nothing to fix the debt, more hawkish intervention”. The opposite is true for high information voters. For example, high-information democrats have systematically different preferences to low-information democrats and are more likely to support policies such as free trade over protectionism and pro-choice over abortion restrictions (Brennan 2016:34). Brennan (2018:68) concludes that if the majority of ignorant or misinformed white voters were excluded “[a] Donald Trump would not stand a chance”. These findings are cited from Althaus (2003) and Brennan notes that Caplan (2007) has gotten similar results with different datasets. This suggests that screening out poorly informed voters would leave us with an electorate which is more inclined to vote for policies that are pro-choice, fixing the debt and so on. This also suggests that it does not matter which

¹⁰ Data from Statista suggest that middle aged and older voters with less or no degree were more inclined to vote to leave, while younger voters with higher education wanted to remain.

¹¹ According to BBC News the voting results in the EU Referendum were 51,9% in favor of leaving the EU.

demographic group one is a member of, as long as one is a high information citizen. However, as Brennan notes (2016:34) most *poor democrats* have preferences that are similar to those of low information voters: “[Poor democrats] more strongly favored the Patriot Act, invasions of civil liberty, torture, protectionism, and restricting abortion rights and access to birth control.” Thus, there seems to be a correlation between having a high income and being a high information voter, which suggests class disparities in how politically well informed a typical voter is. Brennan does not state explicitly that having these kinds of preferences itself leads one to make better political decisions, but if voters know which policies are likely to further their desired ends it will at least be partly less difficult for them to cast votes where policy and outcome preferences align.

2.2.4 The argument from altruism

As earlier noted, it seems that voters do not tend to vote in their own self-interest but in what they perceive to be the common good of the nation (Brennan, 2016:50). For Brennan (2016:51) the problem is that citizens don’t know which policies will result in the common good. Given that a more competent electorate will be more likely to choose policies that will align with their desired outcomes this will reduce the bad epistemic effects of poorly informed reasoning. By combining the claim that a competent electorate makes better political decisions in virtue of being better informed with the claim that voters already vote with others’ interests in mind, Brennan predicts that society would benefit more from restricted suffrage than from democracy. Even the disenfranchised would be better off since their interests would be seen to by the altruistic voting tendencies of the enfranchised.

With these four claims Brennan concludes that epistocracy would not only be just but so competent in producing better political results that its implementation would benefit society more than democracy currently does. He argues that if an epistocracy is shown to produce substantially better results this would for example justify a restricting of political equality among citizens. Yet, he concedes that epistocracy is not without its problems. One kind of argument that is raised against his elite electorate is that of the demographic objection to epistocracy which aims to highlight the potential pitfalls of restricted suffrage. The objection aims to undermine epistocracy by showing that it would not be fair to all demographics in society as well as not produce desirable political results.

3. The demographic objection to epistocracy

A demographic objection starts from the assumption that members of any demographic ought to have fair opportunities in life. The objection can be made in regards to any situation where demographic groups are not evenly represented and this is likely to affect that group or other groups in society. For example, one could object that if most leaders of a country are white this is not representative of the citizens of this country. One could in turn object that white leaders are not able to adequately address issues of black demographics.

In our context, I take the demographic objection to concern epistocracy specifically since epistocracies, in one way or another, aim to base voting rights on competence. The objector assumes that there are no inherent cognitive differences between members of different demographics' abilities to understand politics. However, society is not designed in a way that gives each demographic group the same possibilities for developing their cognitive abilities in relation to political competence. The objection then develops two main forms of reasoning. First, it is a concern of whether a system that excludes citizens from voting based on knowledge can be *fair* if underlying injustices give different groups in society different opportunities to become knowledgeable. If it is the fact that education is an unequally distributed good among the people due to socioeconomic circumstances, then citizens may be disenfranchised regardless of their intelligence or effort. Now, this may not be a problem for an epistocratic society since it is mainly concerned with creating better political efficiency whether or not the society is characterized by fairness of opportunity. Yet, it may raise problems of legitimacy which could in itself undermine the political efficiency if laws are not followed. The disenfranchised may refuse to cooperate with government policies as they lack influence over the political process or perceive their exclusion as offensive and unjust.

This leads us to the second concern of the demographic objection, namely that epistocracy would lead to bad political outcomes. If groups that once had voting rights find themselves without it, they may not be as inclined to follow the rules laid down by their government. Resentment against a state that deem them unworthy of participation could therefore be a problem for political stability. Democrats contend that underlying social injustices may be further exaggerated since the exclusion of the incompetent is a result from previous social injustice. Additionally, while political competence has epistemic benefits, concentrating power with any elite, big or small, might also carry with it downsides, unrelated to education or merit specifically, which may counteract the admitted benefits. For example, knowledge received from education is not the only knowledge that matters in

politics and concentrating power with certain advantaged groups compounds the effects of their interests, biases and faults.

In what follows I will develop this objection mainly in relation to two scholars, Estlund and Landmore, who approach the issue from separate angles. Estlund is concerned with the fact that however competent a certain demographic group is, there is reason to suspect that they will have epistemically damaging features that neutralize the epistemic benefits of education. If voting rights are based on political competence, the epistemically damaging features of these groups will be compounded and assert a disproportionate influence over each demographic. Landmore's approach proceeds from those that are disenfranchised and what knowledge may be lost in terms of their experiences as situated in a specific social context. She is also interested in what kind of epistemic consequences an exclusion based on competence may have for the psychology of the excluded and included respectively. Apart from these differences, both are primarily focused on challenging the proposed benefits of knowledge that aims to show how well an epistocracy would perform, i.e. its outcomes, but they also touch upon the fairness aspect. Brennan has given the demographic objection special attention in a paper from 2018 which aims to address these concerns. After outlining the version of the demographic objections I will discuss why Brennan thinks the demographic objection is much weaker than his objectors believe.

3.1 The demographic objection from inequality

Before the Voting Rights Act of 1965 the American South employed literacy tests that a citizen had to pass to be able to vote (Estlund 2003:62). It led to "indirectly disenfranchising poor Southern blacks by formally disenfranchising citizens who failed" (Estlund 2003:62). Estlund (2003:62) argues that this was a result of ignorance of the epistemic value of black voters and points out that objecting on procedural grounds was common, since this practice exaggerated already existing inequalities between black and white citizens. Whether such practices were the result of ill will or ignorance (or both), its consequences remained the same; excluding black citizens from voting under the guise of excluding the incompetent.

Citizens can acquire political knowledge in many ways, for example if politics is their hobby, they are active in a party or organization or are working in the government. However, the most straightforward way of acquiring political knowledge is through education and education is not a good that is equally distributed in society. Fishkin (2014:206) argues that even though the proportion of adult US citizens with a college degree has grown a great deal,

it is “extremely unevenly distributed across the class structure.” A recent estimation showed that, in the US, 82.4 % of 24 year olds from the top income quartile had a completed bachelor’s degree, while only 8.3 % of the bottom income quartile had one (Fishkin 2014:206). Many factors play in, like how high-income parents make sure to prepare their children for future education and can afford to pay the cost of going to college. It is likely that the elite electorate would be disproportionately composed of citizens of higher income because they are more likely to be well educated. Citizens that have achieved a bachelor’s degree will also be more able to acquire the knowledge they might lack because they have had more practice in learning. An academic background will be a crucial advantage in order to pass a voting exam. Since an academic background is the disproportionate privilege of high income families, competence based voting rights would favor high income demographics over low income demographics. Fishkin (2014:211) relates his discussion to the *Griggs v Duke Power*¹² case of 1971, which was initiated due to racial segregation in hiring or promotions at the energy company, Duke Power. The company implemented high school diploma and intelligence test requirements for positions where these qualifications were unrelated to the tasks of the position. Since the black population had less access to education, the court decided to rule in favor of Griggs. Their ruling was based on the inequality of opportunity between black and white citizens which reflected the underlying injustices in society, like inferior education in segregated schools for black citizens. As Brennan (2016:33) points out, political knowledge is negatively correlated with being black so one could expect this demographic to be underrepresented if restricted suffrage was implemented. Political knowledge is also positively correlated with the top half of income earners, which would further be to the disadvantage of black citizens in the US because of the wealth gap between black and white families.¹³

Even if access to education would be equally distributed, there may be other socioeconomic factors that would disturb citizens' possibilities to acquire knowledge, like being foreign-born or the child to foreign-born parents.

A recent example of educational disparities which may have unintended consequences if restricted suffrage epistocracy was implemented in Sweden, is the contrast in completed

¹² Black employees at one of Duke Power’s generating plants in North Carolina brought this action against the company. As stated by the U.S. Supreme Court on their website regarding the case: “The Act proscribes not only overt discrimination, but also practices that are fair in form, but discriminatory in operation” (Justia U.S. Supreme Court 1971)

¹³ According to Schermerhorn’s article in Time (2023) the Federal Reserve's latest survey on consumer finances showed that “[i]n 2022, the typical African American family has 16 cents on the dollar compared to the typical white family”.

high school education in different regions of Örebro. Young people in Vivalla are less likely to finish the Swedish equivalent of high school compared to the rest of young people in Örebro municipality.¹⁴ Young people in Vivalla are also more likely to be born outside of Sweden or have one or two parents born in a foreign country. Having a high school education will determine one's chance of getting a higher education which at least partly determines one's political proficiency. Therefore, under restricted suffrage it would also partly determine one's actual possibility to vote. In the case of Örebro, exclusion based on competence might in practice lead to exclusion based on being foreign-born or a child of foreign-born parents. This is arguably unfair to these citizens if it is the result of underlying social injustice, like ineffective integration or living in a vulnerable area.

Lastly, I believe that a politics exam will have to be construed on the political knowledge we have at our disposal, and as already mentioned, this knowledge is more concentrated with the affluent population. Apart from the fact that poor people would not have equal chances of passing a voting exam compared to affluent citizens, those who design the test will likely share similar demographics as the citizens who would pass it and, in turn, may design a test with a perspective skewed to the benefit of the designers themselves, regardless of any ill intent. This might create a feedback loop that safeguard voting rights in the hands of the more affluent parts of society. And, it seems like adding insult to injury to exclude citizens that already have a less favorable socioeconomic position.

3.2 The generalized form of the demographic objection

Unequal demographic representation would not only be a matter of fairness but it may also lead to unwanted political results. Estlund (2003:62) writes that even granting that citizens act with good will, they are inevitably biased by demographic factors such as race, gender and class, and giving extra votes to some citizens will compound the effects of their biases. Electoral decisions take the form of general law, which everyone will be subjected to. Under restricted suffrage disenfranchised voters will be subjected to decisions they have no influence over. Estlund (2003:61) also concedes that, other things equal, a well-educated population will rule better than a less educated population. He argues that while this claim is generally defensible it does not necessarily support that well-educated citizens ought to have more voting power or, vice versa, that the less educated ought to have none.

¹⁴ According to statistics from SCB 2016, 41% of women and 38% men passed their high school exams while in the rest of the municipality 85% of women and 80% of men passed.

Estlund (2003:67) is arguing against Mill's plural voting scheme but hopes that his objection is applicable against other forms of epistocracy as well. Mill's plural voting scheme grants each citizen one vote in virtue of membership but grants more votes to those that are well-educated on the grounds of the epistemic benefits of their education (Estlund 2003:57). In contrast, restricted suffrage prohibits citizens from voting if they cannot demonstrate sufficient political knowledge. Nevertheless, Estlund's concerns seem to apply to restricted suffrage as well.

Estlund's (2003:58-64) main argument is that a distribution of political power ought to be generally acceptable to all whose opinion is qualified. It is not specified whose opinion is qualified but Estlund suggests that it is reasonable to disagree with the statement that education ought to grant some people voting rights and not others. The reasonability of disagreement stems from the worry that the epistemic benefits resulting from being well-educated, may be outweighed by other epistemically detrimental features. For example, the well-educated might be disproportionately sharing certain demographics like race, gender and class that are unrepresentative of the population. As Fishkin (2014:206) shows, most US citizens with a bachelor's degree are from the top income quartile. Factors like class, gender and race bring with it biases that will to some extent influence one's decisions. Peters (2018:393) notes how psychological factors, like *implicit bias*, influence our practical and theoretical reasoning. "Implicit biases are largely unconscious and automatic evaluations that involve stereotype-based associations between social groups and positive or negative properties" (Peters, 2018:393). It is reasonable to assume that people who share demographic features might also share biases, and that these in turn will shape their reasoning, and inhibit them from making disinterested political decisions. Regardless, their decisions, biases and preferences will disproportionately influence the outcome of elections.

Estlund formulates a general form of the demographic objection to epistocracy as:

"[T]he educated portion of the populace may disproportionately have epistemically damaging features that countervail the admitted epistemic benefits of education."
(Estlund, 2003:62)

In an ideal society everyone would get an equal education and would have an equal chance of passing a voting exam (not counting individual ability). In our society the privilege of being well-educated is disproportionately a privilege of groups sharing certain demographic factors (Estlund 2003:62; Brennan 2018:54). According to research cited by

Brennan (2016:33), a typical high-information voter is a middle aged white, rich man with a college degree living in the western parts of the US.¹⁵

Granting voting rights based on political competence is not synonymous with granting voting rights based on education. In Brennan's defense, I believe he could argue that he is not simply interested in education but in political competence. I do not wish to stipulate that education is the only means to acquire political information or develop one's political proficiency. News coverage, reading books, watching documentaries and becoming organized in a party are some of the ways which are open for the politically interested. However, education will likely serve as the foundation upon which one can build further political understanding. Therefore, I claim that Brennan ought to specify how citizens in general will become politically competent without education if he deems education will not have a determining role.

So, what could the *epistemically damaging features* from Estlund's general definition be? Estlund (2003:64) exemplifies with features such as racism and sexism. People would rather not admit to being racist or sexist, while admitting to being of a certain race or gender is less controversial. Estlund (2003:64) suggests that racism and sexism might not be practically possible to study empirically. I take his worry to be that if the prevalence of some feature can't be studied with accuracy then it can't be tested accurately. Such features would therefore slip past a test and unduly influence the elections.

Yet, this is no longer true since today there are implicit bias tests, so called IATs¹⁶, that can test our associations for example in regards to value concepts and racial stereotypes. To make Brennan's voting exam more effective in not letting racism or sexism unduly influence elections, IATs may be built into the exam. However, I still believe Estlund has a point when he expresses that privileged demographics may have features that we cannot test for and which therefore will have disproportionately more influence if they retain voting rights, while unprivileged groups do not. A voting exam that aims to screen out detrimental features in the electorate presupposes that we know what biases or stereotypes are important in relation to voting and that there aren't important biases and stereotypes remaining unidentified. Fricker (2007:6-7) points out that before a pattern of *hermeneutical injustice* is identified there will still be on-going marginalization until it is identified and made sense of. Fricker (2007:6) claims that "[a] central case of this sort of injustice is found in the example of a woman who

¹⁵ Brennan's cited research is focused on the US population.

¹⁶ "The IAT measures the strength of associations between concepts (e.g., black people, gay people) and evaluations (e.g., good, bad) or stereotypes (e.g., athletic, clumsy). The main idea is that making a response is easier when closely related items share the same response key." - Project Implicit, About IATs copyright 2011.

suffers sexual harassment prior to the time when we had this critical concept, so that she cannot properly comprehend her own experience, let alone render it communicatively intelligible to others.” Before such a concept is established, a perpetrator would also likely not be able to understand that an injustice is being committed. It will be difficult to establish beyond reasonable doubt that all discrimination in society is identified and accounted for, which may be a precondition of establishing a competence test that aims to result in better epistemic performance.

Now, education will have epistemic benefits and will likely make a voter more politically competent. But, apart from being epistemically beneficial for voters, there may be conjectural features that travel with education. Estlund (2003:64-65) exemplifies with a thought experiment where the educated are, for whatever reason, sexually frustrated and therefore demand irrationally puritan laws. His argument is that there may always be features that are mistakenly disregarded as not being demographic factors that therefore are not accounted for having epistemically damaging effects. Let’s say that we make a voting exam that corrects for all the empirically identifiable demographic factors, to be as accurate as possible in tracking the desired competence. If there are latent or conjectural features and they, by hypothesis, are missed or not taken to be factors to correct for, these would slip past the test and pave the way for sexually frustrated¹⁷ racists (drawing on earlier examples) having a higher degree of influence over society due to their higher education. If they also tend to be disproportionately white men, this is likely to the detriment of the interests of black women. Now, since we don’t know how the test would be constructed or who would pass it in a real life scenario we cannot say that this particular example would be the case. But each construction of a test may result in a similar scenario with different features being disproportionately favored due to the demographic constitution of the passed voters.

3.3 The demographic objection from experiential knowledge

It is not explicitly stated by Landemore that she is concerned with the demographic objection in the arguments that follow. However, they are grounded in concerns relating to the demographic objection, specifically the neglect of important epistemic resources that people of disadvantaged demographics have. The elite electorate would consist of demographics that

¹⁷ Through IATs we may be able to devise a strategy that rules out tendencies of sexual frustration. But I can think of many people that would object to taking a test that dwells deep into one’s sexuality even if the company or institution providing the test solemnly swear that it is completely anonymous and no data is saved. The infringement on personal privacy may simply be too hard to swallow.

would lack important knowledge privy to the lived experiences of the excluded, and their lack of knowledge would become laws that apply to all. Landemore (2021:205), referring to several studies of standpoint epistemology, argues that there are at least two kinds of knowledge – theoretical and experiential. Theoretical knowledge may be studied by anyone, while experiential knowledge is acquired by having certain experiences. “[K]nowledge is always in part defined and colored by... one’s differentiated place in the world” (Landemore, 2021:205). She argues that there is an epistemic asymmetry between oppressor and oppressed (Landemore, 2021:206). Simply put, the oppressed relates to the oppressor differently than the oppressor to the oppressed. The oppressed will take care to understand the behavior of their oppressors, while the oppressor can afford to be ignorant of the oppressed since they are not under threat. For example, because of institutionalized racism, black citizens must relate differently to the police than white citizens in the US. In relation to this, Du Bois (1999 [1920]) argues that black women have knowledge no one else has because they are both subject to male patriarchy and white supremacy.

As Brennan’s (2016:33) research suggests, political knowledge and economic literacy “is negatively correlated with being black, and strongly negatively correlated with being female.” Disenfranchising these citizens based on political knowledge would lead to a loss of the knowledge they possess in virtue of the epistemic asymmetry of their lived experiences. According to Landemore, regardless of the intentions of the ruling population, this privileged group will lack the insight and knowledge needed to fight the injustice that has placed the disenfranchised population in a position that exempts them from voting in the first place. Landemore (2021:204) argues that movements like Black Lives Matter still struggle in convincing US citizens that white privilege persists and is a problem improperly dealt with.

Additionally, Landemore (2021:197) cites an argument against epistocracy by Zhichao Tong. Tong (2020) builds the theory on Miranda Fricker’s epistemic injustice framework suggesting that a ruling elite will over time become arrogant due to being defined as the brightest political stars. The people holding power would in Fricker’s (2007:4) terms have a *credibility excess* while the disenfranchised would have a *credibility deficit*. This could lead to a general overestimation of the advantaged groups’ knowledge while downplaying the knowledge of disadvantaged groups. Such epistemic arrogance may be one of the features that Estlund fears travel with education or privilege. If one demographic is underrepresented in voting year after year it may be prejudiced against over time. The privileged citizens may overestimate their own ability in comparison to the disenfranchised if they believe that their competence in fact justifies them holding political power. And they might not be able to take

the disenfranchised groups' concerns seriously. If they lack the experiences that give rise to certain concerns they will likely be unable to properly identify and address them. For example, it would be highly controversial to suggest that giving women voting rights in fact has been more epistemically damaging than beneficial, even though this line of thinking was historically held to be true. It is therefore reasonable to suspect that similar tendencies of epistemic arrogance may develop with an elite electorate in regards to disenfranchised demographic groups. In relation to the demographic objection from experiential knowledge, the development of like epistemic arrogance may further downplay the potential epistemic benefits that can be found in marginalized groups.

I have outlined how restricted suffrage, while not intending it, may become a system of unfair demographic representation due to disparities between demographic groups in society. As a consequence restricted suffrage may suffer two-fold from this unequal representation in regards to its political performance. First, the increased influence of potentially damaging features in elite electorates may outweigh the epistemic benefits of their education and privilege and secondly, the loss of or disregard for minority knowledge may further lead to social inequalities tracking demographic factors. Next, I will discuss how Brennan answers this challenge to the fairness and political performance of epistocracy.

4. Does the demographic objection succeed?

Brennan (2018:54) claims that both versions of the demographic objection are weaker against epistocracy than they seem. The first holds that representation must be equal so as to be procedurally fair and the second holds that if some people have more political power than others, this will favor the already advantaged and disfavor the already disadvantaged, leading to bad political outcomes. I will address his arguments from the perspective of the demographic concerns found in Estlund and Landmore where this is applicable and present my own arguments where I deem that Brennan is discussing some topics these scholars have not touched upon.

Brennan (2018:55-56) also presents other alternatives to democracy other than restricted suffrage epistocracy which according to him escapes the demographic objection.¹⁸

¹⁸ Brennan (2018:58) holds that an enfranchisement lottery or a government by simulated oracle would escape the objection for the most part. The enfranchisement lottery is a process promoted by Christiano (2008) where a subset of the population is selected randomly and educated so as to be able to cast an informed vote. The government by simulated oracle is a process where citizens vote, state their demographic information as well as are tested on basic political facts (Brennan 2018:56). This information is then used to estimate what the public would want if it was demographically identical and fully informed.

There is no room in this paper to discuss these in depth and I will focus on his arguments against the objection in relation to restricted suffrage.

4.1 The demographic objection and fairness

Brennan (2018:60) writes that “while epistocrats are (by definition) comfortable with political discrimination on the basis of knowledge[...]they do not intend to discriminate on the basis of race, gender, or other non-cognitive factors.” He concedes that the fairness objection aims to show that despite the best intentions of epistocrats, put into practice, a system like restricted suffrage would discriminate on non-cognitive, demographic factors. As Estlund and Fishkin implies with historical examples of racial segregation, restricted suffrage might create a similar scenario as that of the literacy tests in Southern America, or intelligence tests at Duke Power.

Brennan has two main arguments against the objection from unfairness: we already accept criteria of competence in determining professions which are not demographically representative and random choice would be more fair to all demographic groups than universal suffrage is.

4.1.1 Medical licensing and voting rights

The first argument is an analogy to medical licensing. Brennan (2018:60) points out that “[w]e require doctors and judges to have certain credentials, presumably, to protect innocent people from harm or injustice. But such requirements lead to, e.g., whites and rich people being systematically overrepresented”. Brennan concludes that few people are willing to dismantle this system for the sake of fair demographic representation, and instead holds that most agree that there is underlying social injustice that leads to this disparity and that measures must be taken to solve these underlying factors.

As I see it, the force of the demographic objection is the fact that voting is a fundamental right for members of each demographic group. It is fundamental in the capacity of allowing groups to exert influence over decisions that will affect their lives. The fact that each group will be subjected to government decisions regardless of their desire of being or not being subjected, raises the concern of excluding some groups. I argue that the crucial difference between access to a certain profession and voting rights lies in the fact that elections will affect everyone regardless of their choice.

Let's say that a minority in society does not vote regularly and that they are in general less politically competent due to underlying social injustices. Under universal suffrage they would be able to vote if they, for whatever reason, realized that it was in their interest to do so. Under restricted suffrage they would additionally have to pass the voting exam. If they have less political competence due to underlying injustice they might not be able to vote even if they have the desire to participate. As Estlund (2003:66) points out, the demographic objection applies "when the decisions of the rulers take the form of *general laws* [my emphasis] applying to all." If a citizen is subjected regardless of her choice, this infringement on her personal liberty justifies that the possibility of influencing her subjection is not further diminished due to her lack of competence. Especially since the required competence will be determined by a society that has not given her a fair chance of acquiring the competence in the first place.

Furthermore, in response to Brennan's argument that people would rather address underlying social injustice than dismantling the medical licensing system, I'd like to point out that voting is one of the ways we can *address underlying social injustice*. Voting rights are more fundamental than being allowed to work with what you want because voting takes the form of general law and is a way for unprivileged groups to attempt to change their living conditions. Because unfortunate demographics do not have equal opportunity in society and in effect would not have equal possibility to influence underlying social injustice, restricted suffrage would be unfair. As I previously stated, it is unlikely that young people in Vivalla do not graduate high school because of cognitive factors. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 and *Griggs v Duke Powers* are two ways the American society has combated racial segregation by *dismantling literacy and intelligence tests* that unfairly disfavored black citizens. My argument is that Brennan does not show that the voting exam will differ in practice from earlier attempts to screen out incompetence. Since Brennan does not aim to discriminate on non-cognitive factors, it ought to be important for him to show that this will in fact not be the case under restricted suffrage.

4.1.2 Chance and fairness

Brennan's (2018:62) second argument pertains to showing that if fairness is the main concern for democracy, decision methods implementing randomness would be more fair. This is argued to undermine democracy's defense of being more fair than epistocracy. For example, flipping a coin when deciding presidents, policies or government officials would be more fair

in virtue of subjecting every demographic group to the same chance of having their will influencing the election. If no group can be overrepresented then it is fair for all groups.

I believe that this conflates formal democracy (one vote per citizen) with the moral dimension of democracy. The fairness in that eligible voters get to vote is fair in virtue of eligible voters being able to influence – exerting political power – over those who will rule them. Anderson (1999:312-313) calls equality a social relation and argues that the point of equality is that each individual is considered having the same moral worth. Democratic fairness, as I understand it, stems from the social relation of equality between citizens as they hold the same *prima facie* amount of political power over decisions which will affect their lives. It is a recognition of citizens' rights to political self-determination in relation to each other. Flipping a coin would subject everyone to the same procedure on the same terms but they would in this case not exercise any political power, since the political power is exercised by chance. This argument might deal with the imbalance of representation between groups but strips each group of their ability to politically self-determine through voting.

Furthermore, the question of how it is decided which candidates are going to be decided on by chance is unclear. In a voting system, politicians will support policies which find support among their intended constituency. If this function is stripped, what will replace it? If any candidate supporting any policies has the same chance of getting elected for government positions, this opens up for candidates holding very unsavory views having a chance of coming to power. This would likely not be desired by the general public and would likely not meet epistocratic demands of competence.

To conclude, Brennan's argument does not seem to be an argument for epistocracy since chance is unable to demonstrate competence. I do not think chance addresses both concerns that make universal suffrage a defensible decision method. It addresses demographically fair representation but not the expression of the will of the people. Democracy is a system where the *people* are supposed to hold political power over themselves. Restricted suffrage postulates that only the *competent people* should have this right over the people. Neither of these systems seem to invite chances as a better, more fair contender for expressing each value-set.

4.1.3 Additional thoughts concerning fairness

With regards to the demographic objection from inequality from part three, I argue that the main problem for restricted suffrage is that our societies do not grant equal opportunity for

citizens to become competent. I believe that Brennan does not give proper attention to the details of the fairness objection. His analogy compares apples and oranges, while his second argument seems to miss the point of why having fair voting rights is important in the first place.

Brennan could argue that the way to solve inequality of opportunity would be to implement restricted suffrage in order to make sure that education was more easily accessed for the poor and marginalized. He would then have to support his argument with evidence that suggests that the competent electorate would be inclined to address education and wealth gaps specifically. What outcomes an elite electorate would have will be covered in 4.2.

Another argument I perceive as open for Brennan is that before implementing restricted suffrage, underlying injustices leading to disparities in demographic representation must be adequately resolved, as to allow for each citizen's sufficiently fair opportunity to meet the standards of competence. This might make his theory more justifiable but also less plausible to implement. It might be that this argument would fail on the grounds of being too utopian.

Lastly, I fear that an exclusion of low information voters would give politicians an incentive to direct their campaigns towards already well-educated citizens, because the likelihood of them being able to vote is higher. It is less costly to win the favor of the well-educated than it would be to address the issues that have put the less educated in a position that risks them losing their voting rights to begin with. It might be all-things-considered rational and morally required to work for the common good of the worst off in a society but chances are that limited, self-interested rationality will encourage opposing political behavior from government officials. In relation to the demographic objection from inequality, this may be another reason that will keep excluded demographics out of politics, exaggerating existing disparities.

This concludes my discussion regarding unequal demographic representation and I will now move on to the question of what results such an unequal representation may produce.

4.2 The demographic objection and bad outcomes

In regards to the bad results version of the objection, Brennan (2018:63) defines the issue as follows: if the electorate is overrepresented by some demographic groups over others, as Estlund expects would be the case in an epistocracy, this would favor the already privileged

groups since they would be the ones having voting rights. According to Brennan (2018:63), this claim “depends upon *empirical* claims about how voters vote and what happens when they vote”. While we cannot with certainty predict how voters under restricted suffrage would vote, we can use the already existing data on voter behavior to estimate how an elite electorate would behave. Given the facts that (1) voters tend to vote with the common good rather than self-interest in mind and (2) becoming more informed changes one’s preferences, an electorate which is incentivised into having relevant knowledge in order to pass a voting exam, and where the least informed citizens are excluded, would (3) produce better political outcomes and in turn incentivise politicians to cater for the needs of a more knowledgeable electorate.

Brennan aims to show that the bad results argument against epistocracy fails because it is grounded on false assumptions of what voters know and how they vote. First, he argues that democrats falsely assume that incompetent voters know how to vote to further whatever ends they desire. Secondly, he argues that democrats falsely assume that voters vote in their self-interest.

Finally, with evidence from democracies of both voluntary and compulsory form, he contends that democracies already ignore minority preferences and compulsory voting regimes do very little for minorities apart from getting them to the polls.

4.2.1 Preference alignment and limits of information

Supposedly, democrats assume that inclusion of each demographic group will allow members of each group to make choices that serve their preferred outcomes. But, as Brennan (2018:64) claims, if voters have incorrect views of how policies correspond with outcomes, the assumption that inclusion is enough to make sure that people can exert influence in line with their interests is ungrounded.

Brennan (2018:63) explains that rational voters would support policies that align with their desired political ends, like believing that supporting war in Afghanistan would reduce terrorism. Unfortunately, voters are likely to make mistakes in combining corresponding preferences. They might for example be misguided in believing that war in Afghanistan does in fact reduce terrorism. As stated by Delli-Carpini and Keeter (1996:3), “[i]n the absence of adequate information neither passion nor reason is likely to lead to decisions that reflect the real interests of the public.” For Brennan it is crucial that under universal suffrage this is the actual case – voters are systematically misinformed or ignorant and can therefore not make

rational decisions. Brennan (2018:65) stresses that information changes policy preferences and that high information voters are more likely to combine preferences that serve their motives adequately. Brennan (2018:65) believes that it is implausible to assume that the disenfranchised under restricted suffrage would be well-informed enough to vote in their interest if they were included. Landemore's concerns of the loss of underrepresented demographics' experiential knowledge might not be a strong objection if their knowledge is not put to proper use. They may know what outcome they desire but be incapable of identifying what policies predictably lead to these outcomes. If the input of the disenfranchised neither aids the public nor themselves, their exclusion would raise the quality of elections. Raising the quality of elections, in turn, will raise the quality of the government.

I believe that Brennan has a point that if voters cannot manifest their political will because they are misinformed on correspondence between policies and outcomes, they may vote for policies or outcomes that counteracts what they actually want. They may also vote in line with what they actually want but fail to realize how harmful this is to their lives or the lives of others. But the question remains how the elite electorate will behave considering possible biases.

In relation to Estlund worries that epistemic benefits of education may be outweighed by other epistemically detrimental features within the enfranchised group, I claim that being in possession of political information is not enough to ensure wise decision-making. I believe Brennan himself makes a strong case for the fact that information is not enough to ensure rationality in political thinking and I argue that this undermines the supposed political efficiency of restricted suffrage. As earlier stated, there is a correlation between being a high-information voter and being male, white and rich. This particular social position will likely carry with it certain interests and conceptions of the world one inhabits. Brennan (2016:38) contends that voters tend to engage in *motivated reasoning* in order to "arrive at beliefs that maximize good feelings and minimize bad feelings." They tend to form groups, identify with these groups and favor their group above others, so called *intergroup bias* (Brennan 2016:39). They tend to search for shortcuts in reasoning and habitually choose information that confirms rather than denies their prior commitments, so called *confirmation bias*. A high-information voter is better informed than a low-information voter, but they might be equally biased. For example, Brennan (2016:37) explains that disinterested voters, who do not care enough to form political opinions, are likely to become hooligans if they begin to form opinions and acquire political knowledge. This suggests that an uninformed and indifferent voter's rationality might be less influenced by political biases than the rational

capacities of the highly informed voter. If, as Brennan (2016:40) writes, “[people] acquire information because it helps them root for their team and against their hated rivals”, then it is unlikely that his elite electorate will be more rational than the unrestricted electorate, unless being well informed has an effect that nullifies the inhibiting mechanisms of rationality in political decision-making. It seems reasonable, as Estlund expects, that the negative effects of biases might outweigh the benefits of their education. My conclusion is that in relation to some political problems, an elite electorate may be biased in a way that serves society better than an unrestricted electorate, but it is a risky bet that this will be the case for each conceivable political situation. Or for a sufficient amount of political situations. If they are not more rational or morally reasonable than uninformed voters, it seems that voting rights justified on competence only amounts to voting rights being justified on knowing political information. All we can say with certainty about those that know more is that they know more – not that they will put this knowledge to good use for society and all its demographic groups.

Additionally, I claim that it is controversial to assume that a change in preference due to being more informed will solve the issue of choosing the right candidates with the right policies in a complex world. For example, as Franklin Allen¹⁹ explains regarding the US housing crisis of 2008, experts did not foresee or simply denied that such a crisis could happen. These experts are arguably competent in their field, but it was not enough to understand the complexity of the economic situation. While some voices were raised to warn of a housing price bubble, expert consensus was insulated from the signs of the coming catastrophe. Brennan could argue an epistocracy would have elected officials that would have been more likely to foresee this crisis and implement laws to regulate the economy to avoid the burst. This might be true, but it might also have been the case that his epistocracy would base their policies on expert theories. Since restricted suffrage does not aim to make the experts more competent but rather give those that are incompetent an incentive to become competent, it is unlikely that the situation would have been much different.

The elite electorate may be slightly more likely to foresee emerging problems in fields like economics – given that knowledge of economics would be a prerequisite for passing the voting exam – but they may be slightly less likely to foresee problems emerging within disadvantaged demographics. I ground this assumption on Landemore’s fears that they may lack the experiential knowledge of less privileged demographics. If Landemore is correct that

¹⁹ From *Why Economists Failed to Predict the Financial Crisis* (2009) found at Knowledge at Wharton, University of Pennsylvania.

experiential knowledge is acquired by living a certain kind of life, in contrast to economic knowledge which may be studied theoretically, then the experiential knowledge of excluded demographic groups will not be converted into political action. This would likely be to the disadvantage of these groups.

My next concern relates to the possibility of an elite electorate becoming epistemically arrogant in relation to the disenfranchised. I suggest that the epistemic arrogance relates to Estlund's argument that competence determined voting may compound the influence of detrimental features. More precisely, over time parts of the elite electorate's detrimental features may become an overestimation of their own competence since this competence has granted them a special political position. Over time members of the privileged and competent may see it as their given right to rule since they are the ones that society has deemed as knowledgeable enough to do so, regardless of this being the actual case.

Furthermore, I believe they may disregard the opinions of unprivileged groups for an additional reason which relates to intergroup bias. Let's say that an individual of the privileged group realizes that she has been arrogant in relation to the lived experience of a minority. She expresses these concerns to her privileged friends but this information does not agree with their previously held beliefs, so they dismiss her worries as false. She might either stand her ground or she might defer to the opinion of the majority. If she persists, she might face being ostracized by the group. This may be too high a price to pay for retaining her new beliefs. Some individuals have an unshakeable intellectual and moral integrity, but for most of us the danger of losing group security might be a difficult obstacle to rational thinking.

My claim is that modes of motivated reasoning are manifold and they seem to add up as to create many possible scenarios where detrimental features inhibit the elite electorate from clearly understanding or being able to promote contrary concerns to their own. If only part of the demographic groups have political power this may counteract potential benefits from diverse demographic perspectives. Those of privileged background will tend to agree with people like themselves. This may lead to mistakes when the privileged reason on policies and outcomes which in turn will meet less resistance under restricted suffrage because those that might challenge biased perspectives are excluded from the deliberative process. To conclude, motivated reasoning within privileged groups may undermine their objectivity and have a disproportionate and damaging role when determining the faith of all citizens.

4.2.2 Altruism and trade-offs

The next assumption, which Brennan argues democrats falsely believe, is that voters vote in their self-interest. An elite electorate would then disproportionately favor themselves.

Brennan's (2018:66) argument that this would not be the case, relies on empirical findings that show that voters vote altruistically rather than self-interestedly. He concludes that if voters care about the common good of society any lack in political efficiency stems from a lack of proper knowledge. Restricted suffrage would eliminate those that lack the proper knowledge and the remaining competent electorate would be able to produce both altruistic and high quality voting.

While Estlund (2003:66) expresses concern about self-interested favoring, he argues that the generalized version of the demographic objection applies even when the voting demographics are not motivated by self-interest. The question I believe Brennan has not addressed, is whether voters will be able to overcome the kind of biases that Estlund predicts will have disproportionate influence over society if they are concentrated with voters of privilege. This is not only related to self-interested voting but to any kind of biases that may inhibit rational processing of political information. I therefore claim that even informed altruism may not be enough to eradicate the effects of biases or the lack of experiential knowledge combined with *the difficulty of finding solutions that cater to every demographic need*.

Politics are characterized by trade-offs between solutions that cater to different polity needs due to scarcity of resources. The informed voter's notion of what is best for the common good may be developed on trade-offs between majority and minority interests. A diverse polity will have to compromise and it might then be rational for the enfranchised under restricted suffrage to remain ignorant of or disregard disenfranchised groups' interests. The cost of addressing these issues may be too high. For example, if one has to live a certain kind of life to gain crucial insight into oppressive tendencies within society, many privileged citizens will not be able to acquire this knowledge. Or if addressing structural injustice would compromise the living standards of the privileged groups, they may have reason not to address these issues. I believe that it is often difficult for people to admit that they lead a successful life due to the fact that they have had a more favorable starting position. Convincing men of the effects of male privilege is still an on-going struggle for feminist movements. For the sake of argument, let's grant that gender equality is good for society. If political knowledge is "strongly negatively correlated with being female" as Brennan's

(2016:33) cited research suggests, then excluding female voters in a politics test might set back the struggle for gender equality.

Under restricted suffrage, minorities might persist in the same way as under universal suffrage but additionally they will lack voting rights which is a loss of something valuable since it wouldn't otherwise be a problem if low information citizens retained these rights. I don't think it is controversial to say that it is rarely the oppressor that raises the concerns of the oppressed. If studying politics is all it takes in order to recognize and fight against injustice, how come racial and cultural minorities as well as women were excluded from voting for such a long time? Even if the competent electorate means well, there's a historical perspective that suggests that people in general, regardless of their level of education and privilege, often miss or are unwilling to accept that certain injustices exist. I suggest a strong contender for explaining how this can be the case across the span of levels of competence, is in fact our biased reasoning.

In regards to the altruistic argument, I claim that Brennan fails to address other biases apart from the bias in favor of one's own interest despite the fact that he has done an impressive job of mapping many factors apart from self-interest that affect political thinking. However, he may argue that if the electorate is biased regardless of competence it would serve society better if the electorate were also more competent. But this does not address Estlund's fear of negative effects of compounding i.e. intergroup and confirmation biases. Namely, if we are all biased, disproportionately concentrating the privileged groups' biases could lead to political outcomes that favor these already privileged groups even if they have altruistic motives.

4.2.3 Siding with the rich and compulsory voting

One clear difference in well-being between majority and minority groups in the US pertains to the wealth gap between the average black family and the average white family, where black families have 16 cents on the dollar to white families (Schermerhorn, 2023). According to Brennan (2018:67) while "the rich are slightly more likely to vote than the poor, presidents are about six times more responsive to the rich than the poor." It is also the case in the US that high income white citizens have more *de facto* power than low income black citizens, since they vote more frequently (Brennan 2018:58). Furthermore, evidence from compulsory voting regimes suggest that while this gets citizens to the polls, it does not have any other significantly better results in regards to political knowledge, political organization or quality

of representation compared to voluntary democracy (Brennan 2018:68). These arguments are meant to show that democracy already neglects minority interests, since minorities are smaller and less politically active groups. Minorities, in virtue of being less privileged in general than the majority, would likely be overrepresented among the disenfranchised. Brennan (2018:69) concludes that excluding them from voting would therefore not likely hurt them since including them does not likely benefit them. Additionally, Brennan (2018:67) argues that “if politicians are already siding more with high-income voters[...]then this partly explains why democracies perform as well as they do, at least from an epistocrat’s perspective.” Brennan (2018:67) then constructs a thought experiment aimed to show that if the majority of a democracy is white the exclusion of all low information white voters may serve black voters, even if most black voters are also excluded.

I think his first example regarding politicians siding with the rich may, contrary to his own beliefs, show why low-income voters are kept poor and less able to achieve a college degree. If for example minorities vote for candidates that promise to address underlying social injustice and these candidates instead implement policies that favors the privileged this could be one of the reasons minorities are kept in a disadvantaged situation. Furthermore, unless the failure to address the underlying injustices that lead to racial segregation *only* stem from the influence of low information voters then it isn’t likely that their exclusion will help address said injustices. In fact, if his previous examples are correct racial problems persist despite politicians siding with the interests of the privileged. Perhaps, as an epistocrat, he should consider excluding high income, white male voters since they are the only one’s society hasn’t tried to exclude yet. It might be that they are too privileged to effectively identify which policies would benefit society the most.

5. Concluding remarks

So, does the demographic objection to epistocracy succeed? I believe questions of the possibility of overcoming bias and stereotypes remain open for both democrats and epistocrats, but it seems that Landemore makes a good case that in order to overcome oppression in society, the voices of the oppressed are needed. Albeit, their knowledge may be lost or misused if they lack adequate political competence, their standing in relation to other citizens are also at stake. If they possess invaluable knowledge in regards to overcoming oppression, the underlying socioeconomic factors that keep them from attaining other

political knowledge ought to be addressed without their participation being diminished further.

I also contend that Estlund's fear that epistemic impartiality will have unacceptable consequences, if the privileged have more political influence, puts competence based voting rights under suspicion. While perhaps neither Estlund's nor Landemore's version of the demographic objection are conclusive against all Brennan's arguments against it, together they pose a formidable challenge which Brennan has only partly addressed. Apart from self-interested voting, he has not addressed the many concerns of how different biases or stereotypes pertaining to demographic characteristics may inhibit disinterested political thinking and favor the already privileged. While information changes policy preferences and this may have some positive results, like less restrictive abortion laws being preferred, it is not conclusive that it won't have other negative results, like neglecting minority interests. He has not addressed how an elite electorate can retain political power and be fair to the disenfranchised in view of socioeconomic inequalities that give different demographics unequal chances of being included. The demographic objection is grounded in examples of historical exclusions that have damaged the excluded, and arguably the whole of society, far more than it has benefitted them. Notwithstanding, all the concerns put forward in regards to our biased ways of thinking about politics.

Nevertheless, Brennan adequately shows that many voters lack political knowledge and that it would be better if they had this knowledge. A well-informed electorate would be desirable. If he is correct that rational ignorance gets in the way of political decision-making, perhaps raising the stakes of, or reforming, political decision-making is the solution. To be fair, restricted suffrage is not the only epistocratic solution Brennan endorses and it might be that the demographic objection is stronger against restricted suffrage than other forms of epistocracy. Historical examples of political exclusion may give us pause but at the same time Brennan is correct that these exclusions were mainly a result of racist or sexist agendas which is not the agenda of the epistocrats. After all, they want what's best for society, which includes marginalized groups as well as the privileged. If he can find solutions to address unintended demographic exclusion his theory might be easier to digest.

However, if voters engage in various kinds of motivated reasoning regardless of their political competence, the restricted suffrage claim that a competent electorate will produce more rational and morally superior decision-making in comparison to democracy, looks weaker than Brennan suggests. If my evaluation is adequate, it is likely that a restricted suffrage would amplify already existing inequalities between majorities and minorities, rich

and poor as well as men and women. From the perspective of all those concerned with a just society, this is a bad political outcome. I don't believe that Brennan intends to present a view that promotes racism or classism but it seems to lack an adequate analysis of these potential consequences. I believe that his theory is overly optimistic in suggesting that becoming well-informed will make individuals rational and morally reasonable, while not aggregating the epistemic shortcomings Estlund and Landemore are worried about. There is ample room for individuals to have extensive knowledge and use it to make diabolical or irrational choices. In my experience, rationality does not necessarily lead us to the objectively good but rather makes it possible for us to attain what we desire, whatever that may be.

There is also a dimension of political legitimacy which might undermine a restricted suffrage political efficiency. Brennan's paternalistic approach towards unprivileged citizens may not be welcomed by these citizens. I can imagine how it wouldn't sit right for someone being told she is excluded for her own good, while she knows that she has had terrible preconditions for being included. If this perceived insult manifests as a subversive will, that is an objection to the system's legitimacy, this could lead to civil unrest and refusal to follow laws.

It is likely that privilege will have a disproportionate role in deciding who will vote since it corresponds to being well-informed. If privilege corresponds with political competence perhaps the money spent on implementing a voting exam and respective institutions may be better spent on reforming the education system and closing income gaps between differently privileged groups within a democratic system. The fact that a more well-educated electorate would likely raise the quality of electoral decisions further sustains the argument that public education can be reformed and more equally distributed as to raise voter competence among other things. Even though the gap between finished high school education has diminished between rich and poor, the gap in achieved college degrees is still a persisting issue. Brennan's high standards of political competence might be too demanding of high school graduates, which further implies that privilege would be a key factor in determining voting rights, since the privileged have better chances of getting a college degree. But even this might not be enough. Rather specifically college graduates in politics, economic and social sciences might be the only ones that can pass.

If Brennan's own notion of rational ignorance in regards to voting under universal suffrage is applicable in regards to whatever information that comes in conflict with preexisting biases, the privileged groups may pass the test and retain their biased views.

When discussing voting behavior of hooligans, he concludes that information is not likely to make one change, or admit the validity of opposing, political views – rather it tends to enforce already existing beliefs. At the same time he argues that information in fact changes one’s preferences which suggests that it would also change one’s political views. There seems to be a tension between these two arguments. I believe Brennan would have to further explain in what way information changes preferences and in what manner this promotes rationality.

In this paper I show that it is not evident that restricted suffrage will make decisions leading to better political outcomes. The elite electorate will lack the knowledge of the disenfranchised as well as being biased in favor of their own worldview in numerous ways. I predict this will undermine their rationality and efficiency in relation to political decision-making. If Brennan can’t convincingly show that restricted suffrage will *sufficiently* outperform democracy in terms of results, traditional democratic arguments from procedural fairness and political equality weigh heavily against this theory.

6. List of References:

American National Election Studies (n.d.). *About Us*. <https://electionstudies.org/about-us/>
(Retrieved 2024-01-02)

Anderson, E. S. (1999). What Is the Point of Equality? *Ethics*, 109(2), 287–337.
<https://doi.org/10.1086/233897>

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

BBC News (n.d). *EU Referendum Results*.
https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/eu_referendum/results. (Retrieved 2023-11-04)

Bell, D A. (2015). *The China Model. Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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

Brennan, J., Landemore H. (2021) *Debating Democracy: Do We Need More or Less?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Brennan, J. (2011). The Right to a Competent Electorate. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 61, no. 245, 2011, pp. 700–24. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9213.2011.699.x>

Brennan, J. (2018). Does the Demographic Objection to Epistocracy Succeed?, *Res Publica*, vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 53-71. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11158-017-9385-y>

Caplan, B. (2007). *Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Christiano, T. (2008). *The Constitution of Equality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Delli Carpini, M X., Keeter, S. (1996). *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Du Bois, W.E.B. 1999 [1920]. *Dark Water. Voices from within the veil*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications.

Fishkin, J. (2014). *Bottlenecks: A New Theory of Equal Opportunity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Justia. U.S. Supreme Court. *Griggs v. Duke Power Co.*, 401 U.S. 424 (1971).
<https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/401/424/> (Retrieved 2024-01-05)

Knowledge At Wharton (2009). *Why Economists Failed to Predict the Financial Crisis*.
<https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/why-economists-failed-to-predict-the-financial-crisis/> (Retrieved 2024-01-02)

Project Implicit (2011). *About the IAT*. <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/iatdetails.html>
(Retrieved 2024-01-02)

Peters U. (2019) Implicit bias, ideological bias, and epistemic risks in philosophy. *Mind Lang.*; 34: 393–419. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.ub.gu.se/10.1111/mila.12194>

SCB Statistikmyndigheten (2018). *Tydliga skillnader bland unga i särskilt utsatta områden*.
<https://www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/artiklar/2018/tydliga-skillnader-bland-unga-i-sarskilt-utsatta-omraden/>. (Retrieved 2023-12-15)

Schermerhorn, C. TIME, Made by History. (2023). *Ronald Reagan's Policies Continue to Exacerbate the Racial Wealth Gap*.
<https://time.com/6334291/racial-wealth-gap-reagan-history/> (Retrieved 2024-01-02)

Statista Research Department (2016). *Share of votes in the Brexit referendum of 2016 in the United Kingdom, by age group.*

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/520954/brexit-votes-by-age/> (Retrieved 2023-12-03)

Statista Research Department (2016). *Share of votes in the Brexit referendum of 2016 in the United Kingdom, by educational attainment.*

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/572613/brexit-votes-by-education/> (Hämtad 2023-12-03)

Tong, Z. (2020). *The Imperative of Competition: Epistemic Democracy in the International Context.* Toronto: University of Toronto (Canada).

US Citizenship and Immigration Services (n.d). *Components of the Naturalization Test.*
https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/document/guides/test_components.pdf (Retrieved 2024-01-03)

Wikipedia contributors. (2023). *Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.* In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia.

https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Chinese_People%27s_Political_Consultative_Conference&oldid=1190429522 (Retrieved 2024-01-03)