

Proposal:

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Was Plato Right? Should the Experts Rule?

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1. Topic outline

Democracy as an overall model for how societies should be governed has been a remarkable success over the last forty years. More countries than ever are now considered to be democratic or at least on their way to becoming democracies.

There are certainly many reasons to be enthusiastic about this historically extraordinary development. The enthusiasm is, however, dampened by several empirical results about the actual performance of democracies. In his by now famous comparison of “quality of life” in China and India, Amartya Sen (2011) concludes that on most standard measures of human well-being, the communist-autocratic China clearly outperforms democratically governed India. This applies, inter alia, for infant mortality, mortality rates for children under the age of five, life-expectancy, immunization of children, basic education of children, poverty rates and adult literacy. Small countries comparisons offer another striking example. Jamaica and Singapore both achieved independence from British colonial rule in the early 1960s. They then had about the same size population and were both very poor, but Jamaica was expected a very rosy future, Singapore a much bleaker one. Jamaica had large areas of arable land, important natural resources, and is located close to one of the world’s most important export markets. Everyone spoke English and very few ethnic-religious cleavages existed. Singapore had no natural resources, no arable land, is far away from major export markets and had very problematic ethnic-religious divisions. The fact today is that Singapore has nine times the GDP/capita than has Jamaica and hugely outperforms Jamaica on human well-being parameters – and the explanation cannot be democracy. According to all the usual measures,

Jamaica has since independence been counted as a democracy while Singapore has never been close (Werlin 2007, Rothstein 2011, ch. 9).

The China vs. India and Jamaica vs. Singapore comparisons are illustrative of a general tendency: As it can be measured, democracy as such does not seem to increase human well-being. Most standard measures of human well-being either have a very weak, or no, or sometimes even negative, correlation with standard measures of the level of democracy (Rothstein 2011).

Furthermore, at the same time as democracy is haunted by significant performance problems, democratic political rule is challenged in many countries as well as in transnational polities such as the EU by an accelerating “expertification” of political processes and policy-making (Weingart 1999, Nowotny, Scott and Gibbons 2003, Fischer 2009, Majone 2014). We have seen a substantive growth in depoliticized expert bodies: courts, central banks, agencies, and expert committees (Vibert 2007, Olsen 2010). Governments, but also interest groups, civil society and political parties feel increasingly the need to appeal and adhere to knowledge and expertise to back proposals, and in case after case we see how the more or less full political process of proposing, deciding and implementing, is de facto handed over to expert bodies and different groups of experts. The 2008 economic crisis seems only to have intensified expertification patterns, for example in Europe, where austerity policies and procedural reform have given the eurocrats, regulators and advisors of the European Central Bank, the European Commission and other EU-level institutions, unprecedented power over member state economic policy (Habermas 2012, Schäfer and Streeck 2013, Offe 2015).

These real world developments are also paralleled by the recent “epistemic turn” in political theory, where familiar normative justifications of democracy, stressing the inherent value of political equality and democratic inclusion, are challenged by accounts focusing on decision quality and good outcomes, and the vital role of expertise in the setting up of “truth-tracking” political procedures (List and Goodin 2001, Mansbridge and Parkinson 2012). This raises the question of whether expert rule, “rule of the knowers” or “epistocracy”, to borrow political philosopher David Estlund’s (2008) term, would be able to outperform democracy as we know it, producing policies that stand a better chance of being “good” or “true”, increasing economic growth, decreasing the level of corruption, handling deficit problems in public finances and more generally improving on human well-being.

Thus the question Plato raised – why not a rule by the most knowledgeable instead of a rule by the many – is again a central issue in political theory and empirical research (Holst 2012). If our concern is decision quality and human well-being, and expertise functions as it is supposed to, as a “filter” ensuring the “truth-sensitivity” of policies and legislation (Christiano 2012), is it not likely that an epistocracy in some version will do better than democracy, considering democracy’s proven performance problems? And what is so wrong, epistocrats ask (see for example Caplan 2007, Brennan 2011), with giving more political power to experts, at least if minimum democratic requirements are in place, if doing so delivers more human well-being? Democratic critics on the other hand urge us to resist and dismiss the Platonic temptation, for moral reasons, referring to the intrinsic value of democratic equality, but doubting also the epistemic merits of expert performance. Maybe democracy performs worse than we would expect and hope for, but experts are no saints; they have biases and make mistakes, some of them disastrous, and over time the wisdom of crowds will outperform any rule by the enlightened few (for example Landemore 2012a, 2012b).

The purpose of this workshop is to take up the challenge from epistocracy in its recent shapes, and bring together research on democracy’s performance and the relationship between

democracy and standard measures of human well-being, with research on the role of expertise in policy-making and experts' performance. How do experts think, deliberate, interact and make decisions relative to non-experts? Which are the merits and pitfalls of expertise-based policy-making relative to more inclusive procedures? How likely is it that the expertification of politics we are currently witnessing over time will deliver decisions that are more sensitive to "truth" and facilitate the making of societies that are better for humans to live in? Should we rather expect reverse developments? A substantive branch of research, has interpreted the performance problems of democracies as a failure of democracy to translate into "quality of government" (Rothstein 2011, Rothstein and Teorell 2012, Holmberg and Rothstein 2015). If this is the case, what are the more detailed mechanisms involved? Which more specifically are the challenges for democracy from a quality of government perspective? And what about political systems and procedures based on knowledge and power to knowers? What is the relationship between different patterns of expertise institutionalization and expert performance and quality of government, be it defined as impartial government institutions (Rothstein and Teorell 2012), or according to other standard "good governance" indicators (Diamond 2007)? The workshop also seeks to bring together empirical research on democratic performance and (or) expert performance and normative political theory contributions on the challenge from epistocracy and the legitimate role of expertise in modern societies. Is epistocracy justified if a rule of the few and wise delivers more human well-being than a rule by the people? What do empirical studies of expert behavior and performance imply for discussions of the normative legitimacy of expert arrangements and expert rule?

2. More on relation to existing research

The relationship between democracy and standard measures of democracy and a set of subjective and objective parameters of human well-being is by now heavily researched (for example Ross 2006, Gerring, Thacker and Alfaro 2012, Halleröd 2013, Holmberg and Rothstein 2015). The same goes for the key role of quality of government for ensuring and increasing human well-being, where a set of studies largely confirm that various measures of a state's administrative capacity, quality of government, levels of corruption, and other measures of good governance, have strong effects on almost all standard measures of human well-being, including life satisfaction and social trust (for example Diamonds 2007, Holmberg et al. 2009, Ott 2010, Norris 2012, and recently Fukuyama 2014). What needs to be explored further however is the more detailed relationship between democracy and quality of government, and which features of democratic decision-making more specifically that are decisive when democracy is translated or not translated into good governance.

A set of disciplines offer research on knowledge and experts and the role of expertise in politics, in the social sciences not least different branches of sociology and political science, from sociology of professions to policy analysis. There are also transdisciplinary fields such as science and technology studies (STS) that in later years have passed through "a wave" of scholarship on expertise (Collins and Evans 2002, 2007). Experts' epistemic performance and the quality of their advice, and the relationship between how expertise is institutionalized in politics and decision quality and good policies have however received limited attention (for a recent review of studies of expertise in the EU, see Holst and Tørnblad 2015), even if there are prominent exceptions, such as political scientist Philip Tetlock's (2005) by now classical study of the quality of expert judgment and predictions. There are also a set of cognitive psychology experimental studies on biases in how experts think (for example Kahneman 2011, Mercier 2011). There is however need for more studies of expert performance, also in non-experimental settings, and a closer understanding of the relationship between expert behavior

and expertise institutionalization, quality of government, and human well-being (Holst and Molander 2014).

Finally, the challenge from epistocracy, and the relationship between outcome-oriented criteria of normative legitimacy and epistemic democracy on the one hand and expert rule on the other, is arguably a cutting edge topic in contemporary normative political theory (for example Anderson 2006, 2008, Lafont 2006, Marti 2006, Estlund 2008, Peter 2010, Lippert-Rasmussen 2012). However, relatively absent from these discussions so far has been implications for assessments of real world contemporary expert institutions and procedures – it is illustrative, that David Estlund’s seminal contribution on the normative legitimacy of epistocracy discusses not current actual developments, but John Stuart Mill’s proposal of an extra vote to the educated in *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861). More links from philosophical arguments to relevant empirical research on how experts think, behave and perform remain also to be made.

3. Participants and type of papers

The workshop is a follow up of a 2014 NOPSA (Nordic Political Science Association) workshop on related questions. There will be an open call for papers, and the workshop directors will work actively to recruit relevant applicants from within their networks. ”

Within the scope of the above topic outline, the workshop invites papers on the empirical relationship between democratic performance and (or) expertise performance on the one hand, and decision quality and measures of human well-being on the other, and papers on the normative legitimacy of expert rule and expertise-based procedures and arrangements.

Papers that relate to the quality of government literature and explores the more detailed mechanisms involved when democracy transforms or fails to transform into quality of government, or the relationship between expertise institutionalization, behavior and performance and impartiality in government and other quality of government indicators are particularly welcome.

Normative discussions of the legitimacy of expert arrangements often rest on empirical assumptions or claims (for example about the epistemic merits of experts’ deliberations and interactions), and empirical studies of experts, for example of how well they perform, rely necessarily on some prescriptive standards of “good” performance. Papers combining normative and empirical discussions in one way or the other will be highly appreciated.

The workshop welcomes papers presenting studies relying on different methods, empirical designs and intellectual traditions as long as research questions and substantive discussions fall firmly within the workshop’s topical scope.

4. Biographical note

Bo Rothstein holds the August Röhss Chair in Political Science at University of Gothenburg in Sweden where he is head of the Quality of Government (QoG) Institute. His most recent books are *The Quality of Government: Corruption, Inequality and Social Trust in International Perspective* (University of Chicago Press 2011) and the edited volume *Good Government. The Relevance of Political Science* (Edward Elgar 2012, together with Sören Holmberg). His earlier monographs in English are *Social Traps and the Problem of Trust* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), and *Just Institutions Matters: The Moral and Political Logic of the Universal Welfare State* (Cambridge University Press, 1998) and *The Social Democratic State* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996). He has published articles in journals

such as *World Politics*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *Comparative Politics*, *European Political Science Review*, *European Journal of Political Research*, *Public Administration and Governance*. In 2012 Rothstein was elected member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences and in 2013 he received an Advanced Research Grant from the European Research Council.

Cathrine Holst is Senior Researcher at ARENA – Center for European Studies, University of Oslo, where she coordinates a project on the European Commission’s use of expert advice and the legitimacy of expert arrangements. Holst is also connected to the Norwegian Institute for Social Research (ISF) in Oslo, where she works primarily on the Europeanization and “expertification” of gender equality policy-making. Her most recent publications are: “Why democracy? On the relationship between gender democracy and gender equality in the EU”, in *States of democracy: Gender and politics in the European Union* (Routledge, 2015), “Jürgen Habermas on public reason and religion: Do religious citizen suffer an asymmetrical cognitive burden, and should they be compensated?” (with Anders Molander), *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* (forthcoming 2015), “Variables and challenges in assessing EU experts’ performance” (with Silje Hexeberg Tørnblad), *Politics and Governance*, (forthcoming 2015), and “Should women represent women? Descriptive representation, institutional variation and normative disagreement”, in *The Challenges of Representation* (Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2015).

5. Funding

Internal resources will be allocated from workshop directors’ host institutions, the Quality of Government-institute, University of Gothenburg, and ARENA – Centre for European Studies, University of Oslo. In addition, applications for the covering of workshop costs (participants’ travel etc.) will be sent the University of Oslo’s Democracy Program, the Norwegian Research Council, and relevant Swedish funding sources (Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation etc.).

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