

# Epistemic Democracy and Technopolitics: Four Models of Deliberation

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, the author examines the structure of four deliberative models: epistemic democracy, epistocracy, dystopic algocracy, and utopian algocracy. Epistocracy and algocracy (which in its two versions is an extremization of epistocracy) represent a challenge to the alleged epistemic superiority of democracy: epistocracy for its emphasis on the role of experts; algocracy for its emphasis on technique as a cognitively and ethically superior tool. In the concluding remarks, the author will advance the thesis that these challenges can only be answered by emphasizing the value of citizens' political participation, which can also represent both an increase in their cognitive abilities and a value for public ethics.

## KEYWORDS

Collective Deliberation, Dystopic Algocracy, Epistemic Democracy, Epistocracy, Political Participation, Public Ethics, Utopian Algocracy

## 1. INTRODUCTION

My proposal in this paper is to briefly examine four models of political deliberation: epistemic democracy, epistocracy, dystopian algocracy, and utopian algocracy. Each of these models presents specific criticalities either regarding the procedures for validating knowledge or for the extension or restriction of the procedures to more or less large groups, or for the role of experts, or for the ethical-political legitimacy of the political system, or for the definition of what is a correct answer in public decision-making processes.

I think that it is useful to compare these models because of some reasons. The first reason is the simple fact that political decision-making systems are sometimes described (mostly by politicians themselves) as models of rational deliberation. As is well known, the term “rational” can be understood in at least two ways: (1) as Kantian universalistic rationality, according to which is rational every motivation and / or procedure that would be adopted by anyone in similar circumstances (Schafer, 2015); (2) as instrumental rationality, according to which is rational that procedure which selects the adequate means to the values of decision-makers (Siegel, 2019), whether an individual, a group or a political body.

In many different public spheres there is an increasingly presence of algorithms that support political and collective decisions. These areas are very different and increasingly specialized and cover for example the taxation system (Małecka-Ziembinska, Ziembinski, 2020), public health care (Zulueta, Harris, Swirsky, 2020; Lipworth, Mason, Kerridge, 2017), automatic combat systems in war

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(Sharkey, 2014), public security (Vaiste, Oljakka, Sivula, 2019), legislative production (Mangiameli, Agata 2019). This constant presence raises the problem of a growing distance of decision-making procedures from the contexts of democratic public deliberation. Politics therefore often tends to be interpreted as technopolitics, since it deals with highly specialized systems that require specialized knowledge both for their selection and for their maintenance. The problem then arises as to whether political and technopolitical choices should be entirely delegated to a small group of expert decision-makers (epistocracy) or should even exclude human decision-makers (algocracy). In both cases, the result is a radical critique of the democratic deliberative model, because of its lacking of epistemic qualities.

I will briefly examine each of these four models, making some critical remarks and in the final part I will describe some ethical-political concerns that I believe must be kept in mind if preferences are formulated for the epistocratic model and for the utopian algocratic model, while I will emphasize some elements that do not they are sufficiently emphasized in the model of epistemic democracy.

## 2. EPISTEMIC DEMOCRACY

Some authors believe that democracy is not simply a method of selecting rulers, but also has the potential to generate just and correct solutions to social problems, which other political systems would lack (Cerovac, 2020). The general idea is that there is an epistemic superiority of democratic procedures, since the decisions generated by public discussion procedures would be analogous to what should happen in an ideal epistemic discussion (Thompson, 2013). In literature, one of the influential definitions of this idea of epistemic democracy is due to Joshua Cohen, who initially labeled it as epistemic populism (Cohen, 1986; Coleman J., Ferejohn J., 1986; Ricker, 1982). Any conception of democracy as an epistemic system must exhibit at least three characteristics (Shapiro, 2003):

1. An independent standard of evaluation of fair procedures, i.e. a report in terms of (social) justice or common good that is independent of contingent general consensus and of outcomes of possible votes;
2. A cognitive account of voting procedures, in which the vote does not express the voter's personal preferences, but is the expression of beliefs, which the voter deems justified, about what policies best fit the independent standard of (1);
3. An account of decision-making processes as a selective emergence of the beliefs produced by the considered judgments of political actors.

Those who support this position are convinced that there is a correct outcome of every single decision-making procedure and that the democratic deliberative process, at least in its ideal conditions, is able to enhance in an unknown way compared to procedures existing in other systems (List, 2011; Riley, 1990). The epistemic conception of democracy has a double superiority: procedural superiority and instrumental superiority. Which of these two is the most important? Should both be considered indispensable in an epistemic conception of democracy (Zagzebski, 2012)?

One might think that in a social system that enhances the fragmentation of value and cultural pluralism, where many find problematic to compare different political systems in terms of value standards and in terms of truth, the idea of epistemic democracy is something out of date, if not theoretically naive. However, in recent times this idea has revived thanks to the works of David Estlund (Estlund, 1994; 2004; 2007). Estlund has developed an approach to justify democratic procedures, which he describes as "epistemic proceduralism". According to Estlund, democratic decision-making processes appear to be selectively the best, i.e. they produce the correct decisions (what he calls "just right decisions") more frequently than alternative decision-making systems. In Estlund's words, "My argument [...] is not that some democratic form of government would be epistemically better than

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