



HAL
open science

Intro Special Issue: Pragmatism and Epistemic Democracy

Annabelle Lever, Dominik Gerber

► **To cite this version:**

Annabelle Lever, Dominik Gerber. Intro Special Issue: Pragmatism and Epistemic Democracy. Raison-publique.fr : arts, politique, société, 2021. hal-03925651

HAL Id: hal-03925651

<https://hal.science/hal-03925651>

Submitted on 5 Jan 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

Intro Special Issue: **Pragmatism and Epistemic Democracy**

Eds Annabelle Lever and Dominik Gerber

Published in *Raisons Politiques* 81. 2021 5 – 10.

Published version: <https://www-cairn-info.acces-distant.sciencespo.fr/revue-raisons-politiques.htm>

This version : Sept 2020

What do truth and democracy have to do with each other? Not much, one might think. After all, the whole point of democracy is that people are entitled to vote no matter their knowledge or virtue, let alone their wealth or lineage. So, in principle, and sometimes in practice, the foolish and corrupt are entitled to rule over the wise and virtuous, just as the foreign-born and/or poor may come to govern rich natives. Such possibilities should be understood as a feature, not a bug, of democratic politics. Hence democracy has historically been the object of derision, aversion and contempt by those who suppose that knowledge and/or virtue are important qualifications for government.

However, at least two philosophical debates nowadays suggest that it would be hasty to assume that democracy has nothing to do with truth, simply because knowledge is neither a necessary nor a sufficient qualification for democratic government. The first debate was provoked by Rawls' claim, following Hannah Arendt, that truth is inimical to democracy and, therefore, a philosophy suitable for democracy should try to avoid political claims about truth in favour of claims about what is reasonable, or most reasonable.¹ The second debate concerns the possibility and desirability of an epistemic justification of democracy. The first debate appears to imply that even if democracies have appealing epistemic properties, the moral and political demands of democracy may preclude insisting on these advantages when publicly justifying democracy itself. The second debate, however, suggests that there may be times when justifying democracy on epistemic grounds is less divisive and controversial than insisting on its moral or political properties.² Hence, while the two debates are independent of each other, there are important areas of overlap and, indeed, of contrast between them.

This special issue examines this second debate about truth and democracy by looking at pragmatist forms of epistemic democracy. For a long time, pragmatist democracy was associated almost exclusively with Deweyan ideas of pragmatism and democracy. However, thanks to the work of Cheryl Misak and Robert Talisse, it now makes sense to talk about 'Peircean democracy', understood as claims about the nature and value of democracy implicit in, and associated with Charles Sanders Peirce's view of truth.³ Specifically, Peircean

¹ John Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1971 220 -229; see also the articles of Cohen, Estlund and Ober in *Truth and Democracy* Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012; eds; J. Elkins and A Norris: Joshua Cohen, 'Truth and Public Reason', 217 -50; David Estlund, 'The Truth in Political Liberalism', 251 -271 and Josiah Ober, 'Truth at the Door of Public Reason: Response to Cohen and Estlund', 273-8.

² Eg. Talisse 'Sustaining democracy: folk epistemology and social conflict'. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 6(4), pp.500–519.

³ Cheryl Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality: Pragmatism and Deliberation*. London: Routledge 2000; "A Pragmatist

epistemic democracy argues that we each have, as individuals, compelling reasons to support democracy because it is necessary to ensure that our beliefs are formed in an environment maximally conducive to establishing whether or not they are true. As believers, we assume that what we believe is true. Hence, the Peircean argument for democracy claims, as individuals we each have compelling reasons to accept democratic government and to prefer it to the alternatives for *epistemic* reasons, however disgusted or disenchanted we may be by it morally or politically. (pp. 27-30 this issue)

Misak and Talisse claim, therefore, that a Peircean justification of democracy can give each of us reasons to support democratic government despite our differences of belief and opinion. But can such a seemingly minimalist argument in favour of democracy work? Can it really succeed, and therefore support the legitimacy of democratic government, at those times when moral and political reasons might lead us to despair or to turn away from it? And why prefer a Peircean to a Deweyan perspective on democracy – one which is, indeed, inspired by our epistemic interests, but which denies that those interests can be reduced to our interests in truth? These are some of the philosophical questions which this special issue addresses – questions whose political relevance, given contemporary dissatisfaction with democracy are, sadly, all too evident.

Philosophically, the Peircean epistemic justification of democracy differs from other epistemic justifications of democracy by its rigour and comprehensiveness.⁴ By contrast with Condorcet-based justifications of democracy there is no claim that increasing the number of people considering a problem will increase the likelihood of a decision being true, (under certain special conditions) and therefore no implication that the epistemic justification is limited to the range of political questions to which Condorcet's insights apply.⁵ And by contrast with Estlund's influential, but controversial, attempt to provide an epistemic justification of democracy, so long as democratic government is epistemically a little bit better than tossing a coin, Talisse and Misak aim to justify democracy compared to the epistemically best of the alternatives.⁶ Thus, if they are right, Peirce can inspire epistemic justifications of democracy that are markedly more general and more demanding than the main alternatives. If they are wrong, of course, it is possible that these alternative epistemic justifications for democracy might still work, although given their controversial premises and the limited epistemic case for democracy, their philosophical and practical appeal is clearly

Account of Legitimacy and Authority", in *Pragmatism and Justice*. Oxford University Press 2017, David Rondel and Susan Dieleman (eds), 295-307; Cheryl Misak and Robert B. Talisse "Pragmatist Epistemology and Democratic Theory: A Reply to Eric MacGilvray". *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 2014 266-376, 2014; and Robert B. Talisse, *A Pragmatist Philosophy of Democracy*. New York: Routledge 2007; and 'Sustaining democracy: folk epistemology and social conflict'. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 6(4), 2013, 500–519.

⁴ See Annabelle Lever and Clayton Chin, 'Democratic Epistemology and Democratic Morality: The Appeal and Challenges of Peircean Pragmatism', *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 22.4.2019, pp. 432 -453.

⁵ See, for example, Dominik Gerber and Michael Fuerstein in this issue. See also Fabienne Peter, 'The Epistemology of Deliberative Democracy' in *A Companion to Applied Philosophy*, (London, Wiley and Sons., 2017), eds. Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen et. al; 76 -88; and 'The Epistemic Circumstances of Democracy', in Michael S. Brady and Miranda Fricker eds., *The Epistemic Life of Groups: Essays in the Epistemology of Collectivities* (Oxford University Press, 2016) 133-149.

⁶ David Estlund, *Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Annabelle Lever and Clayton Chin 439.

much smaller. Hence this special issue focuses on the distinctive properties of Peircean arguments for epistemic democracy, with two articles on Deweyan variants to illustrate pragmatist alternatives.⁷

Should we adopt a Peircean perspective on democracy? To answer that question we start with Cheryl Misak and Robert Talisse's account of their separate paths to Peircean democracy, and the philosophical and political problems which they believe Peirce can help us to solve. (pp.....) In the process, they seek to clarify the relationship between the moral and epistemic dimensions of their argument for democracy, as well as its consequentialist and deontological dimensions. (PP.....) These clarifications are particularly welcome because it is natural to suppose that an epistemic justification of democracy is concerned with the relative ability of democratic and undemocratic governments to 'get it right', and therefore to imply some form of consequentialist justification of democracy; and their own insistence on the relative advantages of epistemic and moral justifications of democracy, to those disgusted with the realities of democratic politics, inevitably raises the question of how the moral and epistemic properties of democracy are related on their view. Hence, in addition to illuminating the appeal of Peircean democracy as they discovered and expressed it themselves, Misak and Talisse offer important clarifications of their views.

The issue then turns to more critical perspectives on Peircean democracy. The first, by Annabelle Lever, focuses on the claim that democracy is necessary but not sufficient for people who want their beliefs to be formed in an environment maximally conducive to truth; the second, by Matthew Festenstein brings out the challenges of 'the boundary problem' for Peircean democracy; while the third, by Dominik Gerber, focuses on the appeal and limitations of Peircean epistemic egalitarianism. The fourth paper, by Valeria Ottonelli, examines the implications of 'the democratic paradox' for Peircean democracy – and, by implication, for epistemic justifications of democracy more generally, and we close with Michael Fuerstein's examination of the affinities between Dewey's pragmatist conception of truth and the nature and value of democracy. This special issue, therefore, uses a debate about the merits of Peircean democracy to illuminate core issues in contemporary democratic political theory concerning the relationship of truth and politics, the nature and value of democratic government, and the challenges posed for any form of democracy by its commitment to an ideal in which wealth, virtue, lineage and knowledge are neither necessary nor sufficient for public office and participation.

However, as distinct from other special issues, we thought it would be nice to have an autobiographical dimension to some of our contributions. The point is not simply one of

⁷In 'The Epistemic Circumstances of Democracy', *supra* Fabienne Peter develops what she calls 'a negative argument for democracy' on epistemic grounds. Whereas the standard epistemic argument for democracy highlights democracy's ability to yield the right decisions, the negative argument casts democracy as an appropriate decision-making procedure when we do not know what the right decision is. When we do know what the right decision is, at least with sufficient robustness, there is no epistemic argument for democracy (there might still be moral or political arguments). This modest, but appealing, position reflects her proceduralist and non-consequentialist account of epistemic democracy – specifically her combination of imperfect proceduralism concerning the epistemic value of democracy and pure proceduralism on its legitimate practical authority. However, it is unlikely to appeal to the sorts of people whom Misak and Talisse are hoping to persuade, i.e. those who believe that they *do* have the right answer on matters of individual and collective morality, even if others disagree with them.

personal biography, however, because better understanding the intellectual trajectory that led Misak and Talisse to their shared positions can help us better to understand the Rawlsian and Habermasian influences upon which they draw and which, to an extent, they seek partly to escape, by turning to pragmatism in its Peircean form. Thanks to H el ene Landemore,⁸ epistemic arguments for democracy based on ‘the wisdom of the many’ are fairly well known in France, so a better understanding of contemporary interest in epistemic democracy can be helpful in navigating a literature that now has several offshoots, and where the distinctive assumptions relative to each are not always clear.

For example, while Joshua Cohen is often credited as an inspiration for epistemic justifications of democracy, his development of what he called an ‘epistemic conception of democracy’, and his deployment of it against purely procedural views of democracy, was developed in the service of a robustly egalitarian and deliberative justification of democracy, rather than a distinctively epistemic one.⁹ The case for adopting an epistemic conception of democracy – and, later, of a deliberative one – was to show why a deeper and more appealing conception of liberty, equality, rationality and solidarity could be consistent with the challenges posed by Arrow’s theorem for representative democracy, and therefore a real alternative to both elitist and pluralist conceptions of democracy as, basically, just a matter of aggregating equally weighted votes.¹⁰ For Cohen, the ideal of a political society organised around a shared conception of a common good, incomplete though that might be, suggested a way in which democratic deliberation and voting could sensibly be understood as having a truth content that a politics of preference expression and aggregation cannot offer. However, he never implied that democracy must be better epistemically than other forms of government, nor that the reasons to accept the burdens of democracy are not essentially moral. Rather, the epistemic quality of different forms of democracy matters to their relative moral appeal because, as he sees it, egalitarian forms of deliberative politics enable morally superior ways of relating to each other by minimising coercion and ensuring that its justification adequately reflects the differences between matters of conscience and preference; the differences between reasonable and unreasonable disagreement, and the identification and rejection of false claims to necessity.¹¹ Hence, while the epistemic properties of different forms of democracy play a central role in Cohen’s thought, his commitment to an epistemic *conception* of democracy has never produced an epistemic *justification* of democracy, nor ever seemed likely to do so.

This brief excursus helps to bring out the distinctive appeal and challenges of pragmatist democracy, whether Peircean or Deweyan. Though it might seem natural to try to develop an epistemic justification for democratic government based on the foundations laid by Cohen’s conception of epistemic democracy, neither Peircean nor Deweyan democracy appear to

⁸ Helen Landemore, *Democratic Reason*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013.

⁹ Joshua Cohen, ‘An Epistemic Conception of Democracy.’ *Ethics* 97(1) 1986: 26–38; and ‘Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy.’ In *Deliberative Democracy*, eds. J. Bohman and W. Rehg, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997, 67–91.

¹⁰ For a discussion of Cohen’s work in this context see Lever and Chin, 436-9; and Melissa Schwartzberg, ‘Epistemic Democracy and its Challenges’, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 18. 2015, pp. 187–203.

¹¹ On different institutional versions of the ideal see Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, *Associations and Democracy*, ed. Erik Olin Wright, London: Verso, 1995; and Joshua Cohen and Charles F. Sabel, ‘Directly Deliberative Polyarchy’, *European Law Journal*, 3.4. 1997, 313–342

presuppose the sorts of shared agreement and explicit commitment to a politics of the common good so important to Cohen's vision. On the contrary, one of the notable features of the Peircean justification of democracy is its *radical individualism* – its idea that the epistemic case for democracy applies to individuals simply *qua* believers, and independent of any agreements, or implicit forms of real or idealised consensus that they may have with other citizens. (pp 27,30 this issue). Likewise, in Dewey, the experimental dimensions of democracy are meant to be intrinsic to the type of government that democracy is, rather than the reflection of a collective commitment to scientific method, or to rationality more broadly conceived. Thus, the epistemic justifications of democracy we explore in this issue mark out a distinctive path in recent work on the relationship of truth and democracy, a path that is different from less pragmatist epistemic justifications of democracy and from a path, marked out by Cohen, in which epistemically robust forms of democracy are valuable whether or not they are epistemically superior to the alternatives.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

The editors would like to thank the FNS for their support for the project, 'Democracy as Political Inquiry: Pragmatist Contributions to Democratic Justification', (grant 100017_162703, 2016 -19). It provided the foundations for our work on this special issue. We would also like to thank Fabienne Peter for her help. Above all, we want to thank Cheryl Misak and Robert Talisse for their patience while this special issue came to life; the patience and support of Benjamin Boudou, Adrian Poama and the other editors at *Raison Politique*; and to Valeria Ottonelli, Matthew Fuerstein and Michael Festenstein for their contributions.