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# Against Democracy: A Case for Epistocracy

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## ABSTRACT

*'Democracy' is the most preferred and most practiced form of government around the world. It is thought to be the best form of government a state could have in which the grievances and calls of every individual is answered. But that is not the case in reality. There are a plethora of flaws in this form of government which are to be examined in this research with the help of lot of examples and accounts of real incidents. This is a high time to address this question whether democracy is the best way to live in a society as we have seen this system is failing and losing its former glory and popularity among the people in the recent times due to the rise of lot of demagogues around the world even in the best of the democracies. Thus this research is undertaken. The spine of the idea of this research is based on the teachings of Professor Jason Brennan of Georgetown University. Plethora of his works including *The Ethics of Voting*, *Against Democracy* is the core of this research. By envisaging power to everybody by the system of democracy we actually limited the power of the people at large which has led to an increase of demagogues in the system which has inhibited us from looking forward for long term sustainable development rather we focused on fulfilment of individual desires. This could be overcome by a relatively unpractised form of government, the Epistocracy.*

**Keywords:** *Demagoguery, Bias, Epistocracy, Competence.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of this century, there has been decline in the number of countries which are following democracy which identified themselves as democracies after the end of colonization. According to the World Democratic Index, at least 167 countries identify themselves as democracies and this even includes the People's Republic of Korea. Only 22 of these countries are deemed as full democracies and rest of the countries are classified as Flawed Democracies, Hybrid Regime or full on Authoritarian. This index and reports further observed is enough to identify that Democracy is entering into the phase of failing dangerously.

Socrates was one of those people who did not believed in the idea of democracy, as he believed that the enterprise of voting does not just depends on the choice of the voter but it is a complex skill that should be taught to the people in a systematic manner and it should not be a guessing

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game. Thus Socrates drew into a conclusion that this is practically impossible and democracy is not a good way of governance. Psychology plays an important role in theorizing any form of government, because it's important to understand how humans will react to certain things. When it is analyzed from the psychology point of view, Democracy does not qualify to be as good as it is said. In a democratic form of government, it possible for the people to lead in a wrong way with psychologically misguided actions.

The influx of democracy took a sharp shoot after the end of colonization era and the newly independent countries started adopting this form of government. This was a step toward the right path which facilitated the inclusion of the whole population of a country into the process of decision making. This ensured that every individual got the opportunity of representation and made sure that no individual is deprived of his/her basic fundamental right as a human. Through this step, a majority population who were historically underprivileged and lacked the resources to enhance themselves and make them more competent for the inclusion of these people in decision making process, were able make progress and integrate themselves with the main stream society effectively leveling the playing field. The other major reason was to limit the accumulation of power with a small number of hands. The Democratic form of governance facilitates this through the separation of powers and creation of checks and balances to keep an individual organ of government from usurping power.

It is true that democracy is the best form of government that is present in the contemporary world due to its historic significance. But it is better to make assertion that democracy was a step towards a right track to effectively relieve of the flaws in the society which were prominent before its influx rather than marking it as the best form of governance. In fact it is only a popular belief among the common people that democracy is the best form of government and there is no chance of it can be flawed form of government. To overcome this democratic triumphalism, the attitude to assess democracy as a process intrinsic, good aspect created in the society by popular ideology and belief in the society is because of the fact that democracy is the best form of government we have tried so far it becomes important identify a better way of governance which are relieved of all the flaws and lacunas of the democratic form of governance.

### **(A) Research Problem**

Although democracy is widely followed across the globe it cannot be deemed that democracy is out of the question of flaws and errs. Practically there are a lot of problems with this system of governance which are often overlooked. These problems are surfacing and creating havoc in the society in the contemporary times. And these problems can be mainly rooted to the

ignorance of common public.

### **(B) Research Questions**

1. Whether the democracy can still be deemed to be the best form of governance that can be used to govern a progressive society?
2. Whether it is justified to vest the power of decision making to the entire people in a heterogeneous society of people with all level of knowledge and understandings of politics and economics?

### **(C) Hypothesis**

1. Democracy is been the best form of government to be adopted and practiced after the end of colonial imperialism by any country. But with time it has accumulated certain flaws in its working and in a progressive society it is no more a good option of governance.
2. In a population containing a heterogeneous society it is hard for the learned person of satisfactory knowledge of politics and economics to make any difference in the decision making in an ocean of ignorant people who are able to participate in the political process overshadowing the prudent decisions of a wise person by their populist decisions.

### **(D) Scope and Objectives**

The scope of this research is to identify the main flaws of the Democracy and to make a case for Epistocracy as better alternative to a democratic form of government, viewing also from a psychological perspective.

The objectives of this research include

- To study the historical background behind the evolution of democracy
- To identify the flaws in a Democratic form of governance
- To study the concept of Demagoguery and its implication in the democratic form of governance with the help of contemporary examples
- To study the impact of psychology of voters in an electoral process of decision making
- To Study why the competence of voters on the basis of their knowledge in politics and economics is crucial
- To study the concept of Epistocracy as an alternate to the Democratic system of governance

### **(E) Methodology**

This research is done in non-empirical research methodology, where it is based on data that are gathered from possible another purpose, which is secondary data.

We have done this research with the help of drawing views from legal thinkers and secondary data mainly books.

**The following methods will be relied upon to fulfill the objectives of the study and collection of necessary data.**

1. Study of the existing books.
2. Primary and secondary source of books and journals.
3. Internet surfing.
4. Listening to the lectures of leading jurists.

#### **(F) Literature review**

This research paper appreciates the work of many eminent jurists around the world. The research paper in accordance with its topic to cover all the relevant information relied on some suitable books the authors being foreign. This research paper has its sources from the works many jurists and legal thinkers from around the world who have deep insight about jurisprudence.

**The Book ‘Against Democracy’ by Prof. Jason Brennan** of Georgetown University gives a very focused and comprehensive explanation on the concept of Epistocracy. He first starts by pointing out that why democracy is a flawed process and why it is not fit for the current day progressive societies. Later he dives deep into the working of Epistocratic governance idea.

In the book **The Ethics of Voting by Prof. Jason Brennan** elaborately explains the voting process of decision making both ideologically and mathematically. He speaks about the ineffectiveness a single vote in the process of decision making. He also speaks how voting is a skill and people should effectively handle it in the process of decision making.

**‘Why not Epistocracy?’ by D. Estlund** explains the idea whether Epistocracy can be applied in a contemporary society preferring it over the idea of democracy. After explaining about the tenets and qualities of Epistocracy he contradicts himself and says that Democracy should be preferred over Epistocracy because the right of voting should not be privilege which is available only to certain sect of society only because they are more knowledgeable than others it should be available universally to all

## **II. FLAWS IN THE DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM**

### **(A) Ignorance of the Common People and Demagoguery**

Joseph A Schumpeter in his book *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* argues that “The typical citizen drops down a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field. He argues and analyses in a way which he would readily recognize as infantile within the sphere of his real; interests. He becomes primitive again.” **And these typical citizens turn out to be an average voter in a democracy.** And to a larger extent these citizens make up most of the voters in a democratic country. **Therefore, people with a satisfying amount of political knowledge power in a democracy becomes very less. This situation becomes the breeding ground for demagoguery. A demagogue assumes advantage of this ignorance among the people and uses this situation to assume power.**

The problem of demagoguery is as old as democracy itself. It was first recorded by **Plato in sixth volume of the book Republic as the words of Socrates who answered the question of Adeimantus. Socrates viewed democracy as a flawed system.** He argues that all the people cannot hold the privilege of voting. He goes on to narrate this with an example. He says that it is not wise for anyone to be appointed as a captain of a vessel. Only people who are wise in the ways of the sea and chartering the way are to be appointed as the captain. But the ideas of democracy do not allow this. He says that people are prone to be intimidated by the flattering and moving words of a demagogue. And these demagogues are the persons who are more likely to win an election and run the government in democracy by their increasingly populist ideology which is the will of these ignorant people.

He discerns that the persons who are seeking election knows how exactly to exploit the desires of the people for easy answers. Ancient Greece did have a painful experience of this demagoguery. For example, the louche figure of Alcibiades, a charismatic, smooth talking aristocrat who took advantage of the chaotic situation prevailing in his time and won the attention of the ignorant common people only to erode their basic freedom and also leading to the disastrous military expeditions costing the lives and fortune of many Athenians.

He imagines an election to be held between two candidates a doctor and other a sweet shop owner. A doctor will do surgery and prescribe medicine and will go against the patient’s desires all in the interest of the patient. Although the process is painful it will yield a good end result. On the other hand the sweet shop owner will fulfill the immediate desires by letting the person eat whatever he likes and only promising to fulfill the temporary desires of the patient at the same time despising the ways of the doctor. Only a person who is reasonable enough to understand the implications of these both actions will choose the right person while the majority of the common people will opt for the sweet shop owner’s flattering words over the doctor’s concern.

**Socrates never came to a conclusion that only a narrow few groups should ever vote. Rather he argued that any person who is educated enough and can think rationally and deeply enough into an issue could vote. He ascertains that voting in an election is a skill not a random intuition and it should be taught to the people systematically.** Sadly, Socrates had fallen prey for this catastrophic ignorance of knowledge of the citizens. When he was put on trial for corrupting the minds of the youth of Athens and the jury of 500 Athenians on the height of their ignorance decided that he guilty and put him to death.

### **(B) Implications of Demagoguery**

A democratic country or any society in general is made of different groups and factions who have different ideology and stand points on different matters of policy. No community can be deemed to be a completely homogenous society. **And these difference in opinion at its extreme point lead to crisis or economic recession or a global insecurity etc. and people demand for immediate change.** This is the birth place of demagogues. At this point a demagogue enters the race and makes idealistic and sensational promises. They understand the people's psychology and promises to make populist change and appeal to their desires and fears and even reinforce popular prejudices to gain support. Say such as the Browning of America, and the decreasing white population's insecurity caused a shift of ideologies of a largely society of democrats to a republican one. A demagogue exploits this opportunity and pushes a very extreme agenda of empty promises. This just what public want to hear and this leads them to blindly give away the power to these demagogues.

**So when these demagogues gets elected nothing really changes as these are extreme promises which have no place in law or the current economic situation of the country to deliver these promises and even the other organs don't aid to deliver these promises. Sometimes in the pressure of delivering these promises the elected demagogues expand their power or declare a state of emergency stripping the rights and freedom of the people. They even usurp the powers of checks and balances provided by the other organs. And on the whole the democracy is compromised.** These cases of demagoguery can be observed as early as Alcibiades of Ancient Athens and Octavian of Ancient Rome to Contemporary case of Indira Gandhi.

One of the best contemporary examples of demagoguery can be that of Volodymyr Zelenskyy the current head of state of the crisis plagued Ukraine. Zelenskyy was a comedian who is known for making sophisticated humor on the Ukranian and Russian Politics. In 2015 Zelenskyy produced and starred on a TV Show "Servant of the People" where he very artistically

demonstrated approach to the presidency by comfortably scripting himself to be one directly exploiting and influencing the mind of the general public by making the same film as his indirect campaign manifesto. And during the 2019 election he skillfully orchestrated his campaign manifesto in very simple yet appealing way to the general public who held strong sentiments over the annexation of Crimea and the political developments thereafter and won the 2019 elections by a landslide gaining a staggering 73% of total vote. But all his manifests soon proved to be empty promises through the years of 2020 and 2021. He is also known to have involved in a number of scandals including the Pandora papers throughout his presidential term all the while trying to accumulate more powers to his office. This proved to be disastrous as his approval rating dropped down to mere 23%. To hold his office, Zelenskyy ventured into the idea of integrating Ukraine into NATO to gain support from the majority Right leaning population. This decision led them into the inevitable war with Russia costing invaluable lives, property and ruined the economy of the country. Now his manner of dealing with the war in a mass appealing way has paved him the way to gain the lost support of the public while leading the country down into an abyss.

### **(C) Power of an Individual in a Democracy**

The idea that every vote is important and that all the opinions of each individual citizen is heard and would be taken into account is been repeatedly stressed on and fed to all the citizens in a democratic country. But this idea is far from reality in a democratic country. In a democratic country everyone have the power to cast a vote. For example in the last general elections on 2019 in India, there were about 900 million eligible voters. Thus, one voter cannot make any difference in a democratic election.

Even on the case of a knowledgeable voter who votes on a rational basis in a prudent manner is always overshadowed by the unruly masses that are moved by the words of the demagogues. So the only options left for these people is to associate themselves with the ideology of a certain political faction or to ignore the democratic process and refrain themselves from participating in the decision making process. Thus, the democracy and the freedom of free political will is shattered in these places.

### **(D) Psychological bias in Democracy**

Bias is almost inevitable in human psychology, even if one is considered to be more rational and knowledgeable. When something is perceived by a human mind, it is perceived in a social or individual perspective, but not with both in majority of the times. But this gap can be bridged when a decision made by an individual with enough experiences. In the case of Democracy; it



has allowed people with not enough knowledge and experiences to make decisions in choosing a leader. For instance, in Tamil Nadu, a considerable amount of voters still cast their vote for DMK or AIADMK just for the face of their late leaders M. Karunanidhi and J. Jayalalithaa even though they have passed away years before. But Knowledge is not the only requirement to be a voter. On a psychological level, to term someone as 'knowledgeable' it is not enough for that individual to completely understand about one subject, but it is one who actually can understand different views on a that particular subject. It's important for a person to have a heterogeneous understanding in an Epistocracy. This form of government promotes to have these kinds of people as the voters. This helps in preventing making decisions without much biased in nature and can be statistically reasonable.

The two things which are needed for knowledge storage are extraversion and conscientiousness. It can be applied in the concept of democracy too, as people can acquire necessary knowledge and certain traits. These traits can be inherited the through learning. It is known fact that the characteristics and needs of the people will change with changing times and circumstances, as each individual perceives their experiences in a different way ideal to them. Thus drawing into a conclusion requires the people to be well informed as they can make a clear decision, instead of making one with a mere assumption. But it almost becomes impossible because everyone is not so much involved in this process.

In terms of election, when the voter have learnt and acquired enough knowledge and experiences from which they can be impartial and think logical, they can make a good decision in making someone a leader who is competent enough. The amount of knowledge and personality traits the people requires changes at different times of elections, but it is important to have them as they will help in finding the best candidate, without any assumptions and errors.

### **III. EPISTOCRACY IN THE MODERN DEBATE**

The above problems of demagoguery and ignorance of the general public can be overcome by an Epistocratic System of Governance. This concept enshrines knowledge as an important aspect to run a government in a country. Simply said, it can be complies with the idea of Socrates that the power of making decision should lie only with the person who can have an insight on the prospective implications of the policies of the government. The idea is to limit the right of voting to those who are knowledgeable and reasonable enough to understand the power of a vote and the outcomes of enacting a policy of a government.

The concept of Epistocracy was firstly pitched as a theory by Plato, identified by Jason Brennan, as an alternative version of Democracy itself. Epistocratic form of government does

have its own requirements to consider oneself as a ‘voter’. A voter must have enough knowledge and reason to back his decision and some traits of personality, and this form of government relies on it.

Epistocracy has always been one of the important topics for argument in political science. In his book “Against Democracy”, Brennan discusses two main topics, first being how democracy can work if voters are not properly informed and are ignorant about politics, and the proposal of a possible alternative system to democracy. Brennan believes People in a democracy have no interest in becoming knowledgeable about politics and have a pragmatic view of reality since they feel they only have a small influence in collective decisions. But there are also other groups which participate more in politics.

### **(A) Types of Persons in a Political View Point**

Brennan categorizes people based on their interest and knowledge about politics. Brennan describes the first group as “The Hobbits”, groups who are ignorant about politics. They usually have no opinion on political happenings. Hobbits “have only a cursory knowledge of relevant world or national history. They prefer to go on with their daily lives without giving politics much thought”.<sup>2</sup>

Then there are groups called "Hooligans", who are characterized by a “strong and fixed worldview”. They only educate themselves with information following to their political beliefs, but they cannot present a substantial argument to a counterpart.

Then there is a third group whom Brennan identifies as "The Vulcans". They have a rational and have a scientific approach to politics. They have tendency to express their opinions having strong background information about the situation. They are not passionate about politics to an extent of getting caught in political bias but are merely interested in it. Hence, they have an emotional detachment to any parties and express opinions based on knowledge and understanding. Brennan also admits that it is hard to put people perfectly in one of the groups, especially in the case of Vulcans everyone is always a bit biased. He argues that if Epistocracy ensures better results than Democracy then we should adopt it.

### **(B) Need for Competence**

Jason Brennan agreeing with Joseph A Schumpeter, political economist, says that people behave, act least rational than before when they involve in politics. Also, many researchers have found the increasing political ignorance among the citizens which has led to this situation

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<sup>2</sup>Josh Brennan, “Against Democracy”, p 4

where there is no proper distribution of information. This is what which has led to the decline in the political participation of people. In many leading countries the voter's turnout has been declining in progressive elections, the voter's turnout for India in 2019 is 67 % and for America it was 54% in 2016. This is more or less half the total population. So, half of the population decides for the whole country.

So rather than giving everyone the right to vote which includes giving right to someone who is not interested, it can be composed to people who are competent and interested. Considering the actual situation, Brennan pitches the idea that by distributing the political power in function of voters' competence in political knowledge, therefore in an epistocratic way, we will have a better-functioning system. Brennan also discusses his theory by starting with the three Estlund's tenets about Epistocracy:

- “1. **Truth Tenet:** there are correct answers to (at least some) political questions;
2. **Knowledge Tenet:** some citizens know more of these truths or are more reliable at determining these truths than others.
3. **Authority Tenet:** When some citizens have greater knowledge or reliability, this justifies granting them political authority over those with lesser knowledge”<sup>3</sup>

Brennan accepts first two tenets and rejects the last one. He says that the case of Epistocracy is an **Antiauthority Tenet**.

**Antiauthority Tenet:** “when some citizens are morally unreasonable, ignorant, or incompetent about politics, this justified not permitting them to exercise political authority over others. It justifies either forbidding them from holding power or reducing the power they have in order to protect innocent people from their incompetence.”<sup>4</sup>

Many political theorists considered this last tenet as absurd. Because they felt that denying someone of an important right is straight up bias and unjust.

**However, Brennan to support his argument admits that past political exclusions have been surely unjust, thus the past movements toward democracy were a step in the right direction. But it does not mean that political inequality is inherently unjust. He says that the fact that people were excluded for a bad reason does not eliminate that there might be good reasons to do that. To give an idea about his argument he compares the voting rights to right to drive, were people are forbidden from driving because they are**

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<sup>3</sup>Estlund, David M. Democratic authority: A philosophical framework.

<sup>4</sup>Brennan, Jason. Against Democracy: New Preface

**incompetent. This is to save innocent people from accidents. He prefers the same for the political rights.**

On these grounds, he outlines the theory of the competence principle:

- (i) The presumptive condition of the right to rule: a ruler should satisfy the competence principle in order to be legitimate and have authority.
- (ii) Mean for assessing government: high-stake decisions are imposed on innocent people; the competence principle requires every individual decision to be made competently and reasonably by competent, reasonable people.
- (iii) Disqualifier principle: it provides grounds for not allowing certain people or political bodies to hold power, and against allowing certain decisions to be enforced.<sup>5</sup>

Brennan concentrates his attention more on the necessity of competence among people. But he does not forget the legitimacy. The antiauthority tenet and the competence principles are not so exclusive to justify a great loss of legitimacy, although it depends on what is considered as competence among people and who decides the competency.

At the light of these considerations, Brennan's defines Epistocracy: "a political system is epistocratic to the extent it distributes political power in proportion to knowledge or competence, as a matter of law or policy. This distribution has to be de jure, not merely de facto."<sup>6</sup>

### **(C) Inequalities in Measuring Competence**

Largely it is deemed that the competence of the people will be identified by a test. And it is true that certain sect of people have more probability in clearing this screening process and participate in the decision making process. For example, a highly educated man living in an urban region has more possibility of clearing this kind of screening when compared with a poorly educated man from a rural background. But this situation could be overcome.

If the less privileged are willing to relieve of their ignorance and act prudently and properly participate in the decision making process with proper education on politics and the skill of voting they will also have same probability as other sects in the society to clear such screening and participate in the governmental process. In that way once all these people have the power of voting with proper knowledge such epistocratic form of governance will acquire democratic

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<sup>5</sup>Brennan, Jason. *Against Democracy: New Preface*, p 140

<sup>6</sup>Brennan, Jason. *Against Democracy: New Preface*

propositions as well by promising the entire people their right to vote.

#### **(D) Epistocracy on Different States of Political Stability**

But it is also very crucial, to isolate the right to vote from the concept of power. In Epistocracy, whoever holds it has the responsibility and not the authority to decide. In an Epistocracy, the right to vote can be distributed according to topics discussed, political period and necessities. For instance, in a parliamentary election in the event of political crisis, socio-political scientists and those who are experts in politics are more competent and suitable to cast votes. Thus it is important to distinguish between elections held in periods of political stability (Epistocracy de facto) and those held in periods of crisis and referendums (Epistocracy de jure).

In the former case generally, people involved in intellectually demanding jobs and with a higher level of education and political knowledge, tend to express better opinions. In the latter case of elections, however, Vulcans are those who have specific knowledge on the topics relevant in that particular moment, which generally are not always the same. Not being Vulcans in this case does not mean that the person must be Hooligan or Hobbit, but it only means that the person is not holding enough information to have the responsibility to decide.

### **IV. CONCLUSION**

From the above argument mentioned, it is evident that the democracy although is a better alternative to a monarchical system it is important to realize that democracy is not without flaws in the system of governance mainly attributed to the ignorance of the common public gives way for demagoguery and by extension in extreme situation strips the citizen of their rights and causing harm to the citizens themselves.

It is inherently biased for the people who are deprived of political knowledge and technical knowledge to hold responsibility and have influential power to take decisions on the state policy which affects all the individual citizens of the country. In a Democracy a person of high competence cannot make any difference in decision making as the collectivity factor will only render his vote negligible. For example, Jason Brennan quotes in his book that even in a democracy we restrict certain citizens from voting say children for example. They are not allowed to vote as they lack proper knowledge to make proper decision and they are easily influenced by some influencers. This is the same case with the hooligans and hobbits they lack proper knowledge and they are also prone to be influence by the demagogues.

In these cases the Epistocratic form of governance relieves from all the flaws in a society and paves way for a progressive utopian society. As Aristotle rightly said unequal people are

supposed to be treated unequally. This is not morally wrong. A person of competency, knowledge and reason will be able to take proper decision which will allow every individual in the state to taste the fruits of its success even if they do not take part in growing the tree.

If done well, Democracy can become as good as Epistocracy when every people acquired the level of knowledge needed. Hence this paper realises that Epistocracy is an evolution of Democracy itself with certain requirements to it. Thus Epistocracy can be deemed as the best suitable way to live in a progressive society which should always be open for progress and development.

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