

CHAPTER 1

HOBBITS AND HOOLIGANS

American revolutionary and president John Adams said, “I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history, naval architecture, navigation, commerce, and agriculture, in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, and porcelain.”¹ Adams was a political animal if ever there was one, but he hoped future generations would evolve into a higher form of life.

This book explains why we should try to realize that hope.

DOES POLITICAL PARTICIPATION ENNOBLE OR CORRUPT? MILL VERSUS SCHUMPETER

The great nineteenth-century economist and moral philosopher John Stuart Mill argued that we should institute whatever form of government produces the best results. Mill advised us to examine *all* the consequences. That is, when asking whether it’s best to have monarchy, oligarchy, aristocracy, representative legislatures, or other forms of government, we should focus not just on the obvious things, like how well different forms of government respect liberal rights or promote economic growth. We should also examine how different forms

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of government affect citizens' intellectual and moral virtue. Some forms of government might leave us dumb and passive, while others might make us sharp and active.

Mill hoped that getting people involved in politics would make them smarter, more concerned about the common good, better educated, and nobler. He hoped getting a factory worker to think about politics would be like getting a fish to discover there's a world outside the ocean. Mill hoped political involvement would harden our minds yet soften our hearts. He hoped that political engagement would cause us to look beyond our immediate interests and instead to adopt a long-term, broad perspective.

Mill was a scientific thinker. When he wrote, few countries had representative government. These few countries restricted suffrage, permitting only a nonrepresentative and elite minority to vote. In Mill's time, political participation was mostly an educated gentleman's pursuit. Mill did not quite have the evidence needed to back up his claims. At most, he had a reasonable but untested hypothesis.

That was just over 150 years ago. The test results are now in. They are, I will hold, largely negative. I think Mill would agree. Most common forms of political engagement not only fail to educate or ennoble us but also tend to stultify and corrupt us. The truth is closer to the economist Joseph Schumpeter's complaint: "The typical citizen drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field. He argues and analyzes in a way which he would readily recognize as infantile within the sphere of his real interests. He becomes a primitive again."²

If Mill's hypothesis is wrong and Schumpeter is right, we must ask some hard questions: How much do we really want people to participate in politics? How much should people even be *allowed* to participate?

THE UPSIDE OF DEMOCRATIC DECLINE

Many books about democracy and civic engagement complain that participation rates are falling. They note that in the late 1800s, 70 to 80 percent of eligible Americans voted in major elections. They then complain that we now muster at most 60 percent for a presidential

election, or 40 percent for midterm, state, and local elections. After citing these numbers, they gnash their teeth. US democracy is more inclusive than ever, with more and more people invited to take a seat at the political bargaining table. And yet fewer people RSVP. Citizens are not taking the responsibility of self-government seriously, they say.

My response is different: this decline in political engagement is a *good start*, but we still have a long way to go. We should hope for even less participation, not more. Ideally, politics would occupy only a small portion of the average person's attention. Ideally, most people would fill their days with painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, and porcelain, or perhaps football, NASCAR, tractor pulls, celebrity gossip, and trips to Applebee's. Most people, ideally, would not worry about politics at all.³

In contrast, some political theorists want politics to pervade more aspects of life. They want more political deliberation. They think politics ennobles us, and see democracy as a way of empowering the little person to take control of their circumstances. Some "civic humanists" regard democracy itself as the good life, or at least a higher calling.

Which side is closer to the truth depends in part on what human beings are like, what democratic participation does to us, and what problems mass political participation is likely to solve—or *create*.

THREE SPECIES OF DEMOCRATIC CITIZENS

We no longer have to speculate, as Mill did, about what politics does to us. Psychologists, sociologists, economists, and political scientists have spent more than sixty years studying how people think about, react to, and make decisions in politics. They've investigated what people know, what they don't know, what they believe, how strongly they believe it, and what makes them change their minds. They've looked into how opinionated people are, how and why they form coalitions, and what gets them to act or participate. I'll review much of this research in greater detail in the coming chapters. Here, I summarize the results.

People differ in how strongly they hold political opinions. Some people cling to their opinions with religious fervor, while others

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have only weakly held views. Some people maintain the same ideology for years at a time, whereas others change their minds in a heartbeat.

People differ in how consistent their views are. Some people have a unified, coherent set of opinions. Others have inconsistent, contradictory beliefs.

People differ in *how many* opinions they have. Some people have an opinion on everything, and some people have hardly any at all.

Then too, people differ in how much information or evidence they have to support their beliefs. Some people have a strong background in the relevant social sciences. Some just watch the news. Others know hardly anything about politics. They have opinions, but little or no evidence backing them up.

People differ in how they regard and respond to those with whom they disagree. Some see their political opponents as satanic, while others think they are merely mistaken. Some believe that at least some of their opponents are reasonable, while others think all of them are fools.

People also differ in how much and in what ways they participate. Some people obsess over politics the way others obsess over celebrity love affairs. Some people vote, volunteer, campaign, and donate. Others never have and never will participate. The state could revoke their political rights, and they wouldn't notice or care.

On each of these issues, citizens fall on a spectrum. But we can simplify matters for the purpose of this book. There are three broad types of democratic citizens that will be interest to us here, which I will label hobbits, hooligans, and vulcans.

- *Hobbits* are mostly apathetic and ignorant about politics. They lack strong, fixed opinions about most political issues. Often they have no opinions at all. They have little, if any, social scientific knowledge; they are ignorant not just of current events but also of the social scientific theories and data needed to evaluate as well as understand these events. 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. In the United States, the typical nonvoter is a hobbit.

- *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. Hooligans consume political information, although in a biased way. They tend to seek out information that confirms their preexisting political opinions, but ignore, evade, and reject out of hand evidence that contradicts or disconfirms their preexisting opinions. They may have some trust in the social sciences, but cherry-pick data and tend only to learn about research that supports their own views. They are overconfident in themselves and what they know. Their political opinions form part of their identity, and they are proud to be a member of their political team. For them, belonging to the Democrats or Republicans, Labor or Tories, or Social Democrats or Christian Democrats matters to their self-image in the same way being a Christian or Muslim matters to religious people's self-image. They tend to despise people who disagree with them, holding that people with alternative worldviews are stupid, evil, selfish, or at best, deeply misguided. Most regular voters, active political participants, activists, registered party members, and politicians are hooligans.
- *Vulcans* think scientifically and rationally about politics. Their opinions are strongly grounded in social science and philosophy. They are self-aware, and only as confident as the evidence allows. Vulcans can explain contrary points of view in a way that people holding those views would find satisfactory. They are interested in politics, but at the same time, dispassionate, in part because they actively try to avoid being biased and irrational. They do not think everyone who disagrees with them is stupid, evil, or selfish.

These are ideal types or conceptual archetypes. Some people fit these descriptions better than others. No one manages to be a true vulcan; everyone is at least a little biased. Alas, many people fit the hobbit and hooligan molds quite well. Most Americans are either hobbits or hooligans, or fall somewhere in the spectrum in between.

Notice that I do not define these types in terms of how *extreme* or *moderate* their opinions are. Hooligans are not by definition

extremists, and vulcans are not by definition moderate. Perhaps some Marxist radicals or libertarian anarchists are vulcans, while most moderates are either hobbits or hooligans.

More generally, I didn't define these types in terms of what ideology they espouse. Consider, for instance, all the people with libertarian sympathies. Some of them are hobbits. These hobbits lean libertarian—they are predisposed to libertarian conclusions—but they don't think or care much about politics, and most don't self-identify as libertarian. Many, perhaps most, libertarians are hooligans. For them, *being libertarian* is a major part of their self-image. Their Facebook avatars are black-and-gold anarchist flags, they only date other libertarians, and they only read heterodox cult economist Murray Rothbard or novelist Ayn Rand. Finally, a few libertarians are vulcans.

Mill hypothesized that getting citizens involved in politics would enlighten them. One way of stating his supposition is that he hoped political deliberation and participation in representative government would transform hobbits into vulcans. Schumpeter, in contrast, thought that participation stultifies people—that is, it tends to turn hobbits into hooligans.

In the chapters that follow, I examine and attack a wide range of arguments that purport to show that political liberty and participation are good for us. I contend that for most us, political liberty and participation are, on the whole, harmful. Most of us are either hobbits or hooligans, and most hobbits are potential hooligans. We would be better off—and others would be too—if we stayed out of politics.

AGAINST DEMOCRATIC TRIUMPHALISM

There is a widely shared set of views about the value and justification of democracy and widespread democratic participation. These beliefs are popular among my colleagues—that is, other analytic political philosophers and political theorists as well as a wide range of laypeople living in liberal democracies. They are less popular among empirically minded economists and political scientists, or among the more empirically minded philosophers and theorists.

Consider all the possible ways democracy and widespread political participation might be valuable:

Epistemic/instrumental: Perhaps democracy and widespread political participation are good because they tend to lead to just, efficient, or stable outcomes (at least compared to the alternatives).

Aretaic: Perhaps democracy and widespread political participation are good because they tend to educate, enlighten, and ennoble citizens.

Intrinsic: Perhaps democracy and widespread political participation are good as ends in themselves.

What I will call *democratic triumphalism* is the view that democracy and widespread political participation are valuable, justified, and required by justice, for all three kinds of reasons. Triumphalism's slogan might be, "Three cheers for democracy!" According to triumphalism, democracy is a uniquely just form of social organization. People have a basic right to an equal fundamental share of political power. Participation is good for us; it empowers us, it's a useful way for us to get what we want, and it tends to make us better people. Political activity tends to produce fraternity and fellow feeling.

This book attacks triumphalism. Democracy doesn't deserve at least two of the three cheers it gets, and it might not deserve the last one either. I argue:

- Political participation is not valuable for most people. On the contrary, it does most of us little good, and instead tends to stultify and corrupt us. It turns us into civic enemies who have grounds to hate one another.
- Citizens don't have any basic right to vote or run for office. Political power, even the small amount of power contained in the right to vote, has to be justified. The right to vote is *not* like other civil liberties, such as freedom of speech, religion, or association.
- While there might be some intrinsically unjust forms of government, democracy is not a uniquely or intrinsically just form of government. Unrestricted, equal, universal suffrage—in which each citizen automatically is entitled to one vote—is in many ways

on its face morally objectionable. The problem is (as I will argue at length) that universal suffrage incentivizes most voters to make political decisions in an ignorant and irrational way, and then imposes these ignorant and irrational decisions on innocent people. The *only* thing that could justify unrestricted, universal suffrage would be that we cannot produce a better-performing system.

In general, the best places to live right now are liberal democracies, not dictatorships, one-party governments, oligarchies, or real monarchies. Yet this does not show democracy is the ideal or even best feasible system. And even if democracy turns out to be the best feasible system, we might be able to improve it with *less* participation. Overall, democratic governments tend to perform better than the alternatives *we have tried*. But perhaps some of the systems we haven't tried are even better. In this book, I won't try to convince you there is for sure a better alternative. I will argue for a conditional claim, however: *if* there turns out to be better a better-functioning alternative, *then* we ought to take it. To some readers, that may sound like a weak claim. Nevertheless, in the current landscape of democratic theory, this makes me radical. Most lay readers and contemporary political philosophers deny this claim; they believe we ought to stick with democracy even if some nondemocratic alternatives turn out to work better.

POLITICAL LIBERTIES ARE NOT LIKE OTHER ONES

Most North Americans and western Europeans, regardless of what party they tend to vote for, embrace a kind of philosophical liberalism. Philosophical liberalism is the view that each individual has a dignity, founded on justice, that imbues them with an extensive range of rights and freedoms—rights and freedoms that cannot easily be outweighed or overridden for the greater social good. These rights are like trump cards: they forbid others from using, interfering with, or harming us, even when doing so would produce good consequences for others. In contemporary US discourse, we sometimes use the word *liberal* to mean anyone left of center, but in political philosophy, it refers to those who think freedom is the fundamental political value.

Liberals—following in Mill’s footsteps—usually hold that people should be allowed to make bad choices so long as they are only hurting themselves. To illustrate this, suppose Izzy—a single, childless man in his twenties—is imprudent. Izzy eats too much, exercises too little, and spends too much. However poor Izzy’s decisions may be, he’s not hurting anyone but himself. Let him live as he sees fit. His choices are bad, but we have no right to stop him from making bad choices.

Many people think that just as Izzy has the right to eat himself into a heart attack, so a democracy has the right to govern itself into an economic crisis. When a democracy makes bad, imprudent, or irrational decisions, that’s just like when Izzy makes bad, imprudent, or irrational decisions.

This analogy fails. An electorate is not like an individual. It is a collection of individuals with separate goals, behaviors, and intellectual credentials. It is not a unified body in which every person advocates the same policies. Instead, some people impose their decisions on others. If most voters act foolishly, they don’t just hurt themselves. They hurt better-informed and more rational voters, minority voters, citizens who abstained from voting, future generations, children, immigrants, and foreigners who are unable to vote but still are subject to or harmed by that democracy’s decisions. Political decision making is not choosing for oneself; it is choosing for everyone. If the majority makes a capricious decision, others have to suffer the risks.

Thus, political decision making, whether democratic or otherwise, has a higher justificatory burden than the decisions we make for ourselves. To justify basic liberal rights, we have to explain why individuals must be allowed to harm themselves. That’s a hard task, and even today some philosophers believe we should be free to stop individuals from making bad choices, even when those choices hurt no one else.⁴ To justify democracy takes more work: we have to explain why some people should have the right to impose bad decisions on others. In particular, as I will show in later chapters, to justify democracy, we’ll need to explain why it’s legitimate to impose incompetently made decisions on innocent people.

I confine my use of the term *political liberties* in this book to include only the right to vote, and the right to run for and hold offices

and positions of political power. Some people prefer to use the word in a broader way, to include the rights of political speech, assembly, and forming political parties. Here, I classify these as civil liberties, as instances of free speech and free association. For example, I classify my right to write this book about political participation as a civil rather than a political liberty.

I intend this to be a stipulation, not a point of conceptual analysis. Nothing substantive turns here on what labels we use. The reason I am interested in the rights to vote and hold office is that these rights—unlike what I am calling the civil or economic liberties—are primarily rights to exercise or attempt to acquire *power over others*. Our rights of free speech generally give us power only over ourselves, while rights to vote typically give us—as collectives, if not as individuals—significant power over others.⁵

HOW TO VALUE DEMOCRACY: INSTRUMENTALISM VERSUS PROCEDURALISM

When we ask what makes a hammer valuable, we usually ask whether it is functional for us, as we are. Hammers have a purpose—to pound in nails—and good hammers serve that purpose. Hammers primarily have *instrumental* value.

When we ask what makes a painting valuable, we generally look to its *symbolic* value. We ask whether the painting is sublime, whether it evokes various feelings or ideas. We also value some paintings more highly because of how they were made and who made them.

When we ask what makes human beings valuable, we will often say that they are ends in themselves. Sure, people can also have instrumental value—the person who makes you coffee serves a purpose—but they also have *intrinsic* value. People have a dignity, not a price.

What about democracy? Most political philosophers agree that democracy has instrumental value. It functions pretty well and tends to produce relatively just outcomes. So, they think, democracy is valuable at least in the way a hammer is valuable.

Most philosophers, however, also think we should value democracy the way we value a painting or person. They claim that democracy uniquely expresses the idea that all people have equal

worth and value. They claim that democratic outcomes are justified because of who made them and how they were made, and see democracy as an end in itself. Some philosophers think that democracy is an inherently just decision-making procedure. A few go so far as to hold that anything a democracy decides to do is justified simply because a democracy decided to do it. They deny there are any procedure-independent standards by which to judge what democracies do.

On the contrary, I will argue that democracy's value is *purely* instrumental; the only reason to favor democracy over any other political system is that it is more effective at producing just results, according to procedure-independent standards of justice. Democracy is nothing more than a hammer. If we can find a better hammer, we should use it. Later in the book, I will provide some evidence that we might be able to build a better hammer than democracy. (Until we build it, though, we won't know for sure.)

One basic question about politics is *who* should hold power. What distinguishes monarchy, aristocracy, democracy, and other regimes from each other is, in the first instance, how they distribute power. Monarchy places fundamental political power in one person's hands, while democracy gives every citizen an equal basic share of political power.

But just as there are competing answers to the question of who should hold power, there are competing views about what criteria we should use to answer the question of who should hold power. The two basic views are proceduralism and instrumentalism. Proceduralism holds that some ways of distributing power are intrinsically just or unjust, or are good or bad in themselves. Instrumentalism maintains that we should distribute power in whatever way tends to promote the procedure-independent right ends of government, whatever those right ends may be.

Proceduralism is the thesis that some way (or ways) of distributing power or making decisions is intrinsically good, just, or legitimate. Or alternatively, a proceduralist might contend that some decision-making institutions are intrinsically unjust. So, for instance, the philosophers Thomas Christiano and David Estlund are both proceduralists. Christiano thinks democracy is intrinsically just.⁶ Estlund doesn't

argue that democracy is intrinsically just, but he thinks that certain regimes, such as monarchy and theocracy, are intrinsically unjust.⁷

Pure proceduralism, the most radical version, holds that there are no independent moral standards for evaluating the outcome of the decision-making institutions. So, for example, the political theorist Jürgen Habermas asserts that so long as we make and continue to make decisions through a particular highly idealized deliberative process, any decision we make is just. Or as the political theorist Iñigo González-Ricoy says (in a paper criticizing me), “In a democratic society no process-independent moral criteria can be referred to in order to settle what counts as a harmful, unjust or morally unjustified exercise of the right to vote, for voting is a device that is only called for precisely when citizens disagree on what counts as harmful, unjust and morally unjustified.”⁸

Notice how strong of a claim González-Ricoy appears to make: people disagree about what counts as harmful or unjust. Therefore, he concludes, we may not refer to any independent standards of justice by which to judge what democracies do. Pure proceduralists believe that there are some objective, opinion-independent moral truths, but these truths concern only *how* we make political decisions, not *what* we decide.

Pure proceduralism has deeply implausible implications. For instance, suppose we had a dispute about whether citizens should be allowed to rape children. Suppose the majority votes, after following an idealized deliberative procedure, to allow adults to rape any children they please. They also vote to have the police ensure that no one stops adults from raping children. A pure proceduralist about democracy would have to say that in this case, child rape would indeed be permissible. For that reason, pure proceduralism appears to be absurd, and so I’m not going to consider it at any length in this book. Other political philosophers have already subjected the best arguments for pure proceduralism to sustained critiques, and I think these critiques are devastating and decisive.⁹

But while pure proceduralism is implausible, perhaps *partial* proceduralism is not. Later in the book, I’ll examine some defenses of democracy that mix proceduralism and instrumentalism.

In contrast to proceduralism, instrumentalism about the distribution of power is the thesis that there are procedure-independent right

answers to at least some political questions, and what justifies a distribution of power or a decision-making method is, at least in part, that this distribution or that method tends to select the right answer. So, for instance, in criminal law, we have an adversarial system in which one lawyer represents the state and the other represents the defendant. There is an independent truth of the matter about whether the defendant is guilty. This truth is not decided by the jury's fiat. Rather, the jury is supposed to discover what the truth is. Defenders of jury trials and the adversarial system believe that as a whole, this system tends to track the truth better than other ones.

The most radical form of instrumentalism is pure instrumentalism. It holds that no way of distributing political power is intrinsically just or unjust. Instead, according to the pure instrumentalist, there is a procedure-independent truth about what the right ends of government are, about what sorts of policies governments ought to implement or what outcomes governments ought to cause. We should use whatever form of government—or no government at all—that most reliably tracks this independent truth.

So a pure instrumentalist would say that if democracy best tracks the truth—that is, if democratic decision making is more likely to lead to good decisions than the alternatives—then we should use democracy. Otherwise, if there's a better alternative, use that. A pure instrumentalist would say that if making Aunt Betty queen leads to the most justice, make her queen. If allowing only black women between the ages of twenty-four and thirty-seven to hold office leads to the most justice, then let's do that. If allowing strange women in lakes to choose kings by dispensing swords produces the most justice, then so be it. If throwing darts at policies written on the wall works best, then do that. And so on.

One could advocate a mixed view, partly proceduralist and partly instrumentalist. For example, Estlund thinks that some alternatives to democracy—such as monarchy—are ruled out entirely on procedural grounds because they are intrinsically unjust. But he believes that procedural considerations alone are not enough to select a regime. They leave us with a few permissible choices, such as anarchy, decision by lottery, and democracy. He thinks we should use democracy instead of the other two because it is more likely to arrive at the truth about what justice requires.¹⁰ For Estlund, proceduralist

considerations rule out a few losers, yet instrumentalist considerations pick the final winner from the remaining contestants.

When I say democracy is a hammer, I mean it is a means to an end, but not an end in itself. I will argue that democracy is not intrinsically just. It is not justified on proceduralist grounds. Any value democracy has is purely instrumental.¹¹ (I remain agnostic about whether any forms of government are intrinsically unjust; it won't matter for my arguments here, so I take no stand.)

WHICH IS THE BETTER HAMMER, DEMOCRACY OR EPISTOCRACY?

Ample empirical research has shown that on almost any attempt to measure political knowledge, the mean, model, and median levels of it among citizens in contemporary democracies is low. I'll discuss just how low it is in chapter 2 (and to a lesser extent, chapters 3 and 7).

Thousands of years ago, Plato worried that a democratic electorate would be too dumb, irrational, and ignorant to govern well. He seemed to argue that the best form of government would be rule by a noble and wise philosopher king. (Scholars debate whether Plato was serious.) Contemporary political philosophers would label Plato an *epistocrat*.¹² Epistocracy means the rule of the knowledgeable. More precisely, a political regime is epistocratic to the extent that political power is formally distributed according to competence, skill, and the good faith to act on that skill.

Aristotle responded to Plato that while the rule of philosopher kings would be best, we'll never have any philosopher kings. Real people just aren't wise or good enough to fill that role, nor, contrary to Plato, can we reliably train them to become that wise or good.

Aristotle is right: trying to develop someone into a philosopher king is hopeless. In the real world, governing is too difficult for any one person to do alone. Worse, in the real world, if we imbued an office with the discretionary power of a philosopher king, that power would attract the wrong kind of people—people who would abuse that power for their own ends.

Yet the case for epistocracy doesn't hang on hopes of a philosopher king or guardian class. There are many other possible forms of epistocracy:

Restricted suffrage: Citizens may acquire the legal right to vote and run for office only if they are deemed (through some sort of process) competent and/or sufficiently well informed. This system has representative government and institutions similar to modern democracies, but does not imbue everyone with voting power. Nevertheless, voting rights are widespread, if not as widespread as in a democracy.

Plural voting: As in a democracy, every citizen has a vote. But some citizens, those who are deemed (through some legal process) to be more competent or better informed, have additional votes. So, for instance, Mill advocated a plural voting regime. As discussed above, he thought getting everyone involved in politics would tend to ennoble them. He remained worried, however, that too many citizens would be incompetent and insufficiently educated to make smart choices at the polls. Thus, he advocated giving better-educated people more votes.

Enfranchisement lottery: Electoral cycles proceed as normal, except that by default no citizen has any right to vote. Immediately before the election, thousands of citizens are selected via a random lottery to become prevoters. These prevoters may then earn the right to vote, but only if they participate in certain competence-building exercises, such as deliberative forums with their fellow citizens.¹³

Epistocratic veto: All laws must be passed through democratic procedures via a democratic body. An epistocratic body with restricted membership, though, retains the right to veto rules passed by the democratic body.

Weighted voting / government by simulated oracle: Every citizen may vote, but must take a quiz concerning basic political knowledge at the same time. Their votes are weighted based on their objective political knowledge, perhaps while statistically controlling for the influence of race, income, sex, and/or other demographic factors.

In recent years, Plato has made a comeback. In political philosophy, epistocracy has reemerged as the main challenger to democracy's throne. Few political philosophers embrace epistocracy; most remain

democrats. But they recognize that a proper defense of democracy must show that democracy is, all things considered, superior to epistocracy. They also recognize that this is not easy to show.

In this book, I contend that the choice between democracy and epistocracy is instrumental. It ultimately comes down to which system would perform better in the real world. I will provide some reasons to believe that epistocracy would outperform democracy, although we do not yet have sufficient evidence to definitely favor epistocracy over democracy. We are forced to speculate, because the most promising forms of epistocracy have not been tried. My goal here is not to argue for the strong claim that epistocracy is superior to democracy. I am instead advocating for weaker claims. For one, if any form of epistocracy, with whatever realistic flaws it has, turns out to perform better than democracy, we ought to implement epistocracy instead of democracy. There are also good grounds to presume that some feasible form of epistocracy would in fact outperform democracy. Finally, if democracy and epistocracy perform equally well, then we may justly instantiate either system.

Epistocrats strike many people as authoritarian. They seem to hold that smart people should have the right to rule over others just because they know better. On this point, Estlund claims that defenses of epistocracy typically rest on three tenets: truth, knowledge, and authority.

Truth tenet: There are correct answers to (at least some) political questions.

Knowledge tenet: Some citizens know more of these truths or are more reliable at determining these truths than others.

Authority tenet: When some citizens have greater knowledge or reliability, this justifies granting them political authority over those with lesser knowledge.¹⁴

Estlund accepts the truth and knowledge tenets, but argues that we should reject the authority tenet. The authority tenet commits what he calls the “expert/boss fallacy.” One commits the expert/boss fallacy when one thinks that being an expert is sufficient reason for a person to hold power over others. But, Estlund notes, possessing

superior knowledge is not sufficient to justify having *any* power, let alone greater power, than others. We can always say to the experts, “You may know better, but who made you boss?” My dietitian sister-in-law, for example, knows better than I do what I should eat, yet that doesn’t mean she should be able to force me to follow a diet she prescribes. Exercise celebrity Shaun T knows better than I do how to get cut abs, but that doesn’t mean he may force me to do burpees.

I agree with Estlund that the authority tenet is false. But, as I’ll argue in chapter 6, the case for epistocracy does not rest on the authority tenet; it’s based on something closer to an *antiauthority* tenet.

Antiauthority tenet: When some citizens are morally unreasonable, ignorant, or incompetent about politics, this justifies *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.

By saddling epistocrats with the authority tenet, Estlund unintentionally makes the case for epistocracy seem more difficult than it is. Epistocrats need not assert that experts should be bosses. Epistocrats need only suggest that incompetent or unreasonable people should not be imposed on others as bosses. They need only contend that democratic decision making, in certain cases, lacks authority or legitimacy because it tends to be incompetent. This leaves open what, if anything, justifies political power.

ARBITRARY VERSUS NONARBITRARY GROUNDS FOR POLITICAL INEQUALITY

Many take it as an unquestionable, nonnegotiable axiom that everyone ought to have an equal share of political power. Unequal political power is a marker of injustice.

They have a point. For most of civilized history, political power was distributed unequally, on the basis of morally arbitrary, repugnant, or evil reasons. We’ve made progress, and we’ve realized what our past mistakes were. We shouldn’t imbue someone with power

just because they are white, Protestant, or male. We shouldn't forbid someone from holding political power just because that person is black, Catholic, Irish, Jewish, or female, because they don't own a house, or because their parents were street sweepers. A person doesn't have the right to rule just because they are the great-grandchild of a conquering warlord. In the past, inequality in political power was almost always unjust. Past movements toward democracy were usually a step in the right direction.

That said, even if past political inequality was unjust, it does not follow that political inequality is inherently unjust. Even if, in the past, people were excluded from holding political power for bad reasons, there might be good reasons to exclude some people from holding power or grant them a smaller share of political power.

In comparison, we should not exclude citizens from driving because they are atheists, gay, or Dalits. Yet that does not mean that all restrictions on the legal right to drive are unjust. There might be *just* reasons to forbid some people from driving, such as that they are incompetent drivers who impose too much risk on others when they drive.

So it might be with political rights as well. Countries used to exclude citizens from holding power for bad reasons, such as that they were black, female, or didn't own land. But though this was unjust, it remains open that there could be good grounds for restricting or reducing some citizens' political power.¹⁵ Perhaps some citizens are incompetent participants who impose too much risk on others when they participate. Perhaps some of us have a right to be protected from their incompetence.

"AGAINST POLITICS" NEEDN'T MEAN LESS GOVERNMENT

At one point, I considered titling this book *Against Politics*. That title could have been misleading, especially in light of some of my other work. I will argue, first, that political participation tends to corrupt rather than improve our intellectual and moral character; second, that political participation and the political liberties are not of much instrumental or intrinsic value; and third, that we would probably produce more substantively just political outcomes if we replaced democracy with some form of epistocracy.

I am not thereby arguing that we ought to reduce the scope of government, however—that is, the number or range of issues subject to political oversight and regulation. Some recent authors, such as legal theorist Ilya Somin, claim that the best way to limit the harms caused by political ignorance is to implement more limited government.¹⁶ He might be right or wrong, but I remain agnostic about this question here.

I think most people are bad at politics and politics is bad for most of us, yet I am not arguing that therefore we should have government do less (or more). Instead, I am arguing that—if the facts turn out the right way—fewer of us should be allowed to participate. If you're a social democrat, I'm suggesting you should consider becoming a social epistocrat. If you're a democratic socialist, I'm proposing you should consider becoming an epistocrat socialist. If you're a conservative republican, I'm saying you should consider becoming a conservative epistocrat. If you're a libertarian anarcho-capitalist or left-syndicalist anarchist, I'm suggesting you should consider epistocracy a possible improvement over current democracy, even if anarchism would be even better.

Philosophers like to distinguish between “ideal” and “nonideal” political theory. Roughly, ideal theory asks what institutions would be best if everyone were morally perfect, with perfect moral virtue and a perfect sense of justice. Nonideal theory asks what institutions would be best given how people actually are—in particular, given that people's degree of virtue is to some extent a function of the institutions they live under. This is a book of nonideal theory. I am not trying to determine what a perfectly just society would look like. Rather, I am asking how we ought to think about political participation and power given that real people have pervasive moral flaws and vices, with only weak commitment to justice.

OUTLINE

In chapter 2, “Ignorant, Irrational, Misinformed Nationalists,” I review the literature on voter behavior. Most democratic citizens and voters are, well, ignorant, irrational, and misinformed nationalists. I explain how the median, mean, and modal levels of political knowledge are

low, how voters make systematic mistakes on many important issues in basic economics or political science, and how voters tend to be biased and irrational. I provide evidence that most citizens are hobbits, and the rest are mostly hooligans.

In chapter 3, “Political Participation Corrupts,” I argue that political participation tends to make us worse, not better. Many democrats think *deliberative democracy*—a political system in which citizens frequently deliberate about politics in an organized way—would cure most of our ills. I maintain, on the contrary, that the evidence shows that deliberation tends to stultify and corrupt us; it makes us worse, not better. A fortiori, I contend that the empirical evidence is much more damning than people have realized. In response to such evidence, many deliberative democrats complain all this demonstrates is that citizens fail to deliberate the right way. But, I’ll suggest, this response doesn’t protect democracy from the complaint that it stultifies and corrupts.

In chapter 4, “Politics Doesn’t Empower You or Me,” I attack a range of arguments that purport to show that political participation and the right to vote are good for us (or are required as a matter of justice) because they empower us in some way. On the contrary, in my view none of these arguments are sound. Democracy empowers *collectives*, not individuals. One argument—popular among political philosophers who follow in John Rawls’s footsteps—holds that we are owed equal rights to vote and run for office because these are necessary for us to realize our capacities to develop a conception of the good life along with a sense of justice. I show this reasoning fails to do the work Rawlsians need it to do.

In chapter 5, “Politics Is Not a Poem,” I critique a range of arguments that purport to demonstrate that democracy, equal voting rights, and participation are good and just because of what they express or symbolize. These claims hold that participation has expressive value, that giving people equal voting rights is necessary to express proper respect for them, or that democracy is necessary for people to have proper self-respect. I contend that these kinds of symbolic and esteem-based arguments fail. They generally fail to show that democratic rights have any real value to us. These arguments provide no good reasons to choose democracy over epistocracy.

By the end of chapter 5, I take it that I've established that there are no good proceduralist grounds for preferring democracy over epistocracy. Of course, there are thousands of books and articles defending democracy on proceduralist grounds, and I don't respond to each of them. Instead, I'm trying to defeat some of the most significant proceduralist arguments.

In chapter 6, "The Right to Competent Government," I defend what I call the *competence principle*, which holds that high-stakes political decisions are presumed to be unjust, illegitimate, and lacking in authority if they are made incompetently or in bad faith, or by a generally incompetent decision-making body. In light of the empirical evidence examined in chapters 2 and 3, it appears that democracies systematically violate the competence principle during elections, although they might not violate it as frequently *after* the election. (The electorate acts incompetently, even if not everyone in democratic government does.) If so, I argue, then we have presumptive grounds to favor epistocracy over democracy.

In chapter 7, "Is Democracy Competent?" I examine some possible responses from democrats. On the basis of various mathematical theorems, some democratic theorists hold that the democratic electorate as a collective body tends to make competence decisions, even though many or most voters are ignorant. I argue none of these mathematical theorems succeed as defenses of democracy, in part because the theorems don't apply to real-life democracies.

Other empirically minded democratic theorists nevertheless contend—and I agree—that what democracies do is not simply a function of what the electorate wants or votes for. Based on a wide range of reasons, democratic governments tend to make fairly competent decisions over a wide range of issues, even though the electorate is systematically incompetent. There are a large number of "mediating factors" that prevent the electorate from getting its way.

In response, I explain that the competence principle is meant to apply to every individual high-stakes governmental decision. It could be that the electorate acts incompetently in most elections, even if government agents often act competently after the elections. If so, to my mind this leaves us with a dilemma: either elections still qualify as high stakes, in which case the competence principle tells us we

should presumptively prefer epistocracy to democracy, or elections don't qualify as high stakes. In that latter case, the competence principle by itself would leave us *indifferent* between epistocracy and democracy. But given that there are no good proceduralist arguments for democracy, we should still just prefer whatever system works better.

In chapter 8, "The Rule of the Knowers," I outline various ways we might instantiate epistocracy. I discuss some of the potential benefits and risks of different forms of epistocracy, and respond to some remaining objections to it.

Chapter 9, "Civic Enemies," is a short postscript. I conclude by saying that what's regrettable about politics is that it makes us enemies with one another. The problem isn't merely that we're biased and tribalistic, that we tend to hate people who disagree with us just because they disagree. Rather, the problem is, first, that politics puts us in genuinely adversarial relationships, and second, that because most of our fellow citizens make political decisions in incompetent ways, we have reason to resent the way they treat us. I argue that for this reason, all things considered, we should want to expand the scope of civil society and reduce the sphere of politics. The reason we should try to realize Adams's hope is not merely because, ideally, we would have no further need of politics. Instead, a major reason we should try to realize it is that politics gives us genuine grounds to hate one another.