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ARTICLE

Standpoints, Knowledge, and Power: Introducing Standpoint Epistocracy

Sophie Keeling

Departamento de Lógica, Historia y Filosofía de la Ciencia, Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED), Paseo de Senda del Rey 7, 28040 Madrid, España
Email: sophie.keeling@fsof.uned.es

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Abstract

Should citizens have equal say regarding the running of society? Following the principles of democracy, and most of political philosophy: yes (at least at a fundamental level, thus allowing for representatives and the like). Indeed, comparing the main alternative seemingly supports this intuition. *Epistocracy* would instead give power just to the most epistemically competent. Testing citizens' political and economic knowledge looks likely to disproportionately disempower marginalized groups, making the position seem like a non-starter and democracy the clear winner. Nevertheless, this paper argues against giving citizens equal say, or at least, it offers the strongest possible motivation for this position. In particular, I introduce the progressive case for epistocracy, and what I term *standpoint epistocracy*. This account refigures the relevant notion of political competence such that it is not the most privileged classes who would likely constitute our epistocracy, but rather, the least. The resulting picture considerably improves on traditional versions of epistocracy and also democracy.

1. Introduction

Should citizens have equal say regarding the running of society? Following the principles of democracy, and most of political philosophy: yes (at least at a fundamental level, thus allowing for representatives and the like). The main alternative as recently defended by Brennan (2022, 2016, 2011), epistocracy, proportions individuals' say to their level of epistemic competence. Yet testing citizens' political and economic knowledge looks likely to disproportionately disempower marginalized groups, making the position seem like a non-starter and democracy the clear winner. As such, epistocracy looks especially unappealing from the perspective of the progressive left. I'll assume the core "progressive" commitment to be something like that of ameliorating the welfare of the least advantaged so as to obtain greater equality. (I understand this in the broadest possible sense to include material equality, but also having the same number of available choices, opportunities for full self-expression, levels of autonomy, etc.).

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This paper, though, introduces the progressive case for epistocracy, and what I term *standpoint epistocracy*. Indeed, the resulting picture considerably improves on traditional epistocracy and also democracy. The literature seems to presuppose that the political knowledge that epistocracy requires consists in political facts, i.e., the sort of propositional knowledge that subjects learn from books and universities. But there are other options. Another would be the deep social knowledge of disadvantage and oppression associated with certain social positions. Under the proposed account, it is not the most privileged classes who would largely constitute our epistocracy, but rather, the least. Here I draw on the broad approach of standpoint epistemology.

I have several goals in this paper. The boldest, but tentative, aim is to defend standpoint epistocracy as a positive proposal, and indeed show the way in which epistocracy carries more appeal than we might think. My primary and more modest aim, though, is to say that *if* we were to reject democracy in favour of epistocracy, this is the way to go. As such, I'll spend some time discussing a notable recent defence of epistocracy (Brennan's), and a key objection. This will provide the outlines of my later argument and highlight its strengths, especially from a progressive perspective. Also, engaging with traditional epistocracy will allow me to show that standpoint epistocracy constitutes an improvement even by its proponents' own lights. The paper is ambitious in introducing this framework, and will have to cover a lot of ground. It can't hope to be the final word on the topic, but instead serves as the basis of further work both developing the account and also further exploring it from different angles (e.g., its appeal both qua form of epistocracy and as a way of translating the insights of standpoint epistemology into a political structure). The paper also hopes to invite further discussion about what counts as "competency" in the political domain.

In pursuing these aims, I therefore go further, and into more controversial territory, than Lenczewska (2021).[1] Lenczewska similarly argues that the presupposed notion of "competence" in discussions of epistocracy is too narrow, that it should include competence as understood by theorists of standpoint epistemology, and that this is vital to political decision-making. But she argues that an epistocratic council could include individuals with both traditional and standpoint competence, and does not in the end defend epistocracy. I, on the other hand, propose an epistocracy entirely made up of those with standpoint competence, and tentatively argue for such an epistocracy as an alternative to democracy.

I proceed as follows. In §2, I introduce epistocracy, its motivations, and why it ultimately looks unappealing. In §3, though, I present a radically different form of epistocracy—standpoint epistocracy. I then argue that it improves on both Brennan's epistocracy and democracy by reworking Brennan's own arguments in §4.

2. Epistocracy and its discontents

We're all familiar with democracy: a society that is, in a fundamental sense, run by the demos, i.e., the people. As Christiano and Bajaj (2022) use it, the term "refers very generally to a method of collective decision making characterized by a kind of equality among the participants at an essential stage of the decision-making process." This section considers the main alternative: epistocracy. I start with Brennan's efforts to motivate the position in §2.1. Nevertheless, as I discuss in §2.2, democracy seems to win out, especially from the perspective of progressive politics, and even, I contend, on Brennan's own terms. Compared with the options currently on the table, democracy does in fact seem the best political system.

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2.1 Epistocracy introduced

Roughly, an epistocracy proportions citizens' say in the running of society to their level of competence in making political decisions. Ultimately, competence amounts to making these decisions in such a way that's apt to ensure that they are good. This might be the straightforward result of the fact that each individual is competent, or it could also be that the group itself functions so as to produce good decisions, and in a way that reflects sufficient knowledge spread amongst participants. Brennan writes that "[s]ometimes intelligence is an emergent feature of a decision-making system. That is, sometimes a decision-making system can be competent even if all or most of the individuals within that system are incompetent as individuals" (2016, 172). In understanding competence, he places emphasis on factual knowledge and rationality, but also writes that competent decision-making involves being unimpaired (e.g., one pays full attention to salient features), moral, and uncorrupt (see 2016, ch. 6). This seems broadly correct but what counts as relevant knowledge in particular is up for debate. How best to understand competence for these purposes is fundamental to the paper and will be discussed in what follows.

To give some examples of proposed epistocracies, Plato's ideal society would be governed by a small elite comprised of philosophers. John Stuart Mill (2010 (1861)) proposed that everyone should receive one vote but graduates should have two. Historical precedence aside, it's worth examining more closely Jason Brennan's (2016) version, whose recent efforts have done much to reinvigorate epistocracy's defence. In fact, he's one of a few contemporary proponents, though see Harwood (1998) and Mulligan's (2018) plural voting models, Jeffrey's (2018) limited epistocracy, and Gibbons (2022, 2021). I will focus on Brennan for reasons of space.

This isn't to say that the boundaries between democracy and epistocracy are completely distinct. For example, even democracies restrict suffrage to those beyond a certain age, plausibly on the grounds that they lack sufficient competence.[2] The main thrust of this paper is nevertheless clear if we follow Estlund and take epistocracy to be a system under which "there is an unconventionally high competence threshold for the fullest right to vote" Estlund (2021, 105).

Brennan (2016) proposes that voting eligibility should depend on passing a competency test. Just as we limit driving to people who are good at driving, we should limit voting to people who are good at voting. As mentioned, this competence amounts to knowledge and a degree of rationality. But importantly, for Brennan this seems to involve in particular a knowledge of political, economic, and social scientific facts.

Brennan offers the following two-step argument for epistocracy. The first step states why competence matters. Put bluntly, we have a right not to be imposed on by ignorant and irrational people. Incompetent political decision-making risks harming others such that we should prefer a competent system of governance over an incompetent one (P1–3). The second concerns relative competence: most voters just don't know much about politics, so it would be comparatively better to limit political decision-making to people who *do* know what they are doing. Democracies make decisions incompetently, but epistocracies do so competently (P4). Brennan therefore concludes that we should implement epistocracy over democracy:

1. *Against proceduralism*: There are no good proceduralist grounds for preferring democracy to epistocracy. [Democracy isn't valuable in and of itself, i.e., simply in

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virtue of the procedures involved. Therefore, what value it has stems from the quality of decisions it produces].

2. *The competence principle*: It is presumed to be unjust and to violate a citizen's rights to forcibly deprive them of life, liberty, or property, or significantly harm their life prospects, as a result of decisions made by an incompetent deliberative body, or as a result of decisions made in an incompetent way or in bad faith. Political decisions are presumed legitimate and authoritative only when produced by competent political bodies in a competent way and in good faith.
3. *Corollary of the competence principle*: Presumptively, we ought to replace an incompetent political decision-making method with a more competent one.
4. *Comparative institutional claims*: Universal suffrage tends to produce incompetent decisions, while certain forms of epistocracies are likely to produce more competent decisions.
5. *Conclusion*: We should probably replace democracy with certain forms of epistocracy (2016, 141–42).

I will now discuss the two steps in turn.

Why competence matters (P1–P3)

Why place importance on the quality of decision-making, and whether decisions are made in a knowledgeable and rational way?

Here, Brennan appeals to the competence principle (P2).[3] He argues that it's unjust to impose important decisions on others if these decisions are incompetently made. To start, we would say that it contravenes one's rights to be tried by an incompetent jury, i.e., one which is ignorant, irrational, immoral, or corrupt (2016, 151–55). For example, suppose the jury was half asleep during a trial; we would think that being subject to its verdict breaches the defendant's rights. This is true even if the jury happens to get the correct verdict. Brennan emphasizes that, nevertheless, the jury risked making a mistake which thus renders their coercive power over the defendant illegitimate. And we can say something similar about the political domain. Governments, as selected by voters, have the power to affect people's lives in many ways. Choosing the government is therefore a high-stakes decision and a bad choice could seriously harm others. It therefore breaches an individual's rights to have this decision imposed on them if it is incompetently made. This point holds even if the choice happens to be a good one—perhaps the elected president in fact excelled in a way no one would have predicted. Brennan concedes that most governing bodies themselves are competent and perform well. But nevertheless, an incompetent electorate risks choosing a bad leader.

Quality of decision-making matters when assessing a system of governance, but is it the only deciding factor? After all, perhaps democracy has intrinsic value regardless of the quality of its decisions, in virtue of empowering individuals. Nevertheless, this value could still be outweighed if implementing democracy would be unjust in other ways (Brennan 2018, 56).[4]

Democracies make decisions incompetently, but epistocracies do so competently

So decision-making quality is an important (and maybe the only) measure for assessing systems of governance. How do the political systems on the table compare? More

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precisely, which systems make decisions in a way that is most apt to produce good ones, and in a way that reflects the greatest relevant knowledge and so forth?

Let's start with the negative claim: Brennan's case against democracy. Brennan sees the voting public as largely irrational and ignorant. He writes that most people possess various biases including: the tendency towards tribalistic thinking whereby we support a party out of a sense of loyalty as opposed to evidence; the confirmation bias, whereby we seek information in a partial way so as to confirm what we already think; and the framing effect, whereby we can be nudged to form certain beliefs just by the language used and surrounding situation. Further, most citizens fail to know even simple political, historical, and economic facts. For example, Brennan cites one study which discovered that "during election years, most citizens cannot identify any congressional candidates in their district" and that "Americans vastly overestimate how much money is spent on foreign aid, and so many of them mistakenly believe we can significantly reduce the budget deficit by cutting foreign aid" (2016, 25, 26). And this is aside from the deep and holistic knowledge we require to assess politicians fully (e.g., Brennan 2016, 28). Yet most citizens, according to Brennan, lack this degree of understanding. All these epistemic shortcomings impact citizens' decision-making when voting, such that he claims they do so incompetently.[5]

For Brennan, a better decision-making procedure would only use competent decision-makers. He instead proposes filtering the electorate with an exam concerning political, historical, and social knowledge which, he argues, most individuals lack. Brennan suspects that we would have to "test basic social scientific knowledge, such as introductory microeconomics and introductory political science" (2016, 213). Interestingly, he acknowledges the potential disagreement about who precisely counts as competent, and allows that the general public could decide this since:

> Questions about competence are easy. Questions about economic policy or foreign policy are much harder. They require specialized knowledge and at times academic training. As [he has argued], citizens make systematic mistakes on these kinds of issues. So there is good reason to hold democracy is incompetent to decide certain economic and political policies, and yet could be competent to decide what counts as competence. (2016, 226)

Nevertheless, though, Brennan seems to presuppose that the relevant notion of competence concerns the domain of economics and social science traditionally construed—that isn't in question even if the precise details remain open for discussion. We should note this assumption since it engenders problems for the view (as I discuss shortly), and I will ultimately challenge it.

Brennan therefore concludes that epistocracies fare better on epistemic grounds than democracies. These two steps lead Brennan to his qualified conclusion: we should probably replace democracy with epistocracy.

2.2 Epistocracy refuted?

Despite the seeming appeal of Brennan's argument from the *competence principle*, his epistocracy encounters a number of problems such that we should prefer democracy.

Notably, the *demographic objection* (Estlund 2003) presents a central worry and one especially troubling for those approaching the topic from the progressive left. It looks like epistocracy would take voting power from certain groups in particular.[6] Namely, it

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would disempower already marginalized demographics. In many political knowledge tests, women and ethnic minorities underperform in comparison to white men. Dow, for example, terms the gender gap "one of the most robust findings in the study of political behavior" (2009, 117). Possible explanations include: unequal distribution of resources such as income and education (Verba et al. 1993),[7] effects of socialisation (Verba et al. 1997), the partisan nature of much political discussion (Wolak and McDevitt 2011), and the history of political exclusion (Delli Carpini 2000). Interestingly, another group of suggestions targets the type of knowledge tested, and indeed, I'll explore the possibilities for refiguring the notion of "political competence" later on.[8] At any rate, Brennan himself writes that his ideal test would be such that it would happen to favour certain demographics over others: "If the United States were to start using a voter qualification exam right now, such as an exam that *I* got to design, I'd expect that the people who pass the exam would be disproportionately white, upper middle- to upper- class, educated, employed males." (2016, 228).

It would most likely still have this effect even if we weaken the competence requirement to concern knowledge of "minimal" political facts, inasmuch as the test would nevertheless disenfranchise a sizeable portion of the electorate (see Gibbons' (2021) "minimal epistocracy"). The demographic objection troubles Brennan's proposal in many ways. Flat-footedly, most societies ought to offer marginalized groups *more* support and respect than they currently do. But it's not obvious that any amount of philosophical maneuvering could render disenfranchising large proportions of marginalized individuals as something which helps in this service. So there appears to be strong *prima facie* moral reason against epistocracy on this basis.

But we can also use the demographic objection to directly target premise 4—that epistocracies produce decisions more competently than democracies. After all, Brennan could maintain that the best way of supporting disadvantaged groups is to have more competent decision-makers, even if that doesn't include them.[9] I'll now consider the way in which the demographic objection challenges Brennan's claim that epistocracy fares better epistemically than democracy.

The demographic objection and epistemic competency

Once we note the demographics involved, epistocracy no longer seems like the most competent decision-making system. In disenfranchising marginalized groups, the resulting electorate under Brennan's system would lose access to important information and in fact become less competent, for at least three reasons (see also Lenczewska 2021, 644–50).

(1) Brennan's epistocrats would lack specific epistemic advantages stemming from occupying marginalized positions in society. First, marginalized groups can possess certain standpoints which provide them with epistemic privilege concerning matters such as oppression (I discuss this more fully later on).[10] The thought is that groups occupying marginalized social positions have especially good access to a range of facts concerning marginalization. For instance, note the issues recently highlighted by Black Lives Matter which many voters and governments were ignorant of, such as mass incarceration and the problems with memorializing slave traders owing to the symbolic message this conveys.

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Further, as Bhatia (2018) discusses, socially privileged individuals often employ "epistemic avoidance".[11] They avoid engaging with evidence that would make the illegitimacy of their privilege and power inescapable. For example, white British individuals may well avoid thinking about, say, everything that the slave trader Edward Colston did because it wouldn't benefit them to do so, and they would find it uncomfortable to think about the ways in which they have indirectly benefitted from a history of colonialism.

Yet, as Bhatia writes, Brennan's epistocrats may well engage in epistemic avoidance.[12] Competence exams couldn't test for this, at least not if they just check individuals' factual knowledge. I can add that current governing bodies and politicians often lack this knowledge—it has been up to protesters to inform them of their shortcomings. This is despite the fact that professional politicians, many of whom would have studied subjects like politics and economics in great detail, would surely pass Brennan's test if anyone would.

As such, I disagree with Brennan who says that, although certain populations will have more say, they will nevertheless vote altruistically and "for what they perceive to be the national common good" (2016, 227). The point is that, even if privileged individuals sincerely believe that they are acting out of general interest, they can still be influenced in many ways unbeknownst to them.

(2) As Bhatia also rightly points out, marginalized groups are unlikely to be listened to and included in deliberation if they lack the vote (or rather, they'll be heard even less than they are now). It's not that epistocrats would include marginalized groups in all discussions leading up to their decisions and so would still utilize their expertise. Epistocrats would lack incentive to do so. Also, marginalized groups would be perceived as less authoritative in being disenfranchised on epistemic grounds (Bhatia 2018). As Bhatia observes, we already see this in the form of widespread testimonial injustice (Fricker 2007), and have every reason to think this would increase under Brennan's proposal.[13]

(3) Further, excluding oppressed groups would render the resulting electorate considerably less diverse. Landemore (2013) argues at length that "diversity trumps ability", and that the *most* important thing for group decision-making is a range of perspectives. That way, the group has more information and a wider range of options to choose from. If the voting group consists predominantly of one particular demographic (i.e. well-educated, white, able-bodied, and financially secure), then the group would embody fewer perspectives and would homogenize.

Even if we don't think that cognitive diversity in and of itself is the most important thing for group decision-making, excluding the marginalized groups in question still constitutes a significant cost. I agree with Brennan here that diversity simpliciter is not itself beneficial (2016, 181–85). Would a parliamentary group really be better for including the perspectives of anti-vaxxers, flat earthers, and racists? Surely not.[14] Yet we might still think that a diverse group of people with important information improves on a more homogeneous group. As the earlier discussion showed, this is the case for Brennan's epistocrats. In disenfranchising already marginalized demographics, the overall decision-making group would lose important standpoint knowledge.[15]

In various ways, then, it looks like Brennan's epistocracy wouldn't produce decisions more competently than democracy.

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Even if we accept that we should choose our system of governance along epistemic lines, epistocracy still seems to fall flat.

3. The progressive case for epistocracy: Introducing standpoint epistocracy

The popular response to the above concerns is to reject epistocracy entirely in favour of democracy (this seems to be Bhatia's response). But this isn't the only option. We can also radically reformulate what an epistocracy would look like and the notion of competence it uses.

Discussions of epistocracy (both for and against) often have something specific in mind when discussing voting competence. This is the sort of competence that one acquires through traditional university education in economics, history, and social science. Recall the way in which Brennan's discussion centred around the nexus of social science, even though he allowed there might be differences in how we construe competence in that domain. His argument for the current electorate's incompetence consisted in illustrating ignorance of these sorts of economic and political facts. And even his critics seem to accept this presupposition: the demographic objection rejects epistocracy on the grounds that it would disenfranchise marginalized groups.

But we needn't cash epistocracy out in this specific way. Epistocracy has a very general notion at its heart: society should be run by those with most competence and knowledge. But this allows us to plug in a radically different form of competence. Recall how Brennan's epistocracy failed to make space for the insights of standpoint epistemology: we can reformulate epistocracy so that it gives standpoint epistemology a central role. I would also be open to other ways of understanding epistemic advantages associated with marginalized groups, but focus on this here owing to space. On this topic, Lenczewska (2021) similarly argues that occupying marginalized standpoints gives one a politically vital epistemic competence. But she proposes that marginalized groups would be added to an epistoratic council alongside those with traditionally construed political competence, while I argue that an epistocracy should just be composed of them. I discuss this more later on.

Here I will introduce a novel account of political governance that I term *standpoint epistocracy*. It accords political power to those possessing the knowledge of disadvantage, injustice, and oppression stemming from certain standpoints. §3.1 starts by outlining discussions from standpoint epistemology in more depth, and §3.2 builds on these to propose standpoint epistocracy. A subsequent section motivates this position. I call this the "progressive case" for epistocracy, since it should appeal especially to those with the fundamental commitment to ameliorating the welfare of marginalized groups. My case will involve arguing that a specific injustice is inflicted on marginalized groups in imposing incompetent decisions on them and that we should therefore allocate power to those with the relevant competences, that is, themselves. This will be more just and hopefully also lead to materially better outcomes for these groups. But I should emphasize that my argument doesn't rest on this commitment to progressive concerns.

3.1 Standpoint epistemology

Standpoint epistemology as a broad approach takes as its starting point knowers themselves and the ways in which they differ from each other, that is, the thought that knowers are *differentiated*.[16] These differences affect what subjects can come to know and the ways in which they come to know them. 20-year-old Sally can come to know

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about life in World War II by reading books, but 100-year-old Samira can remember it. Samira's knowledge may also be a lot richer than Sally's. Importantly, knowers occupy a range of social positions, and these give rise to different epistemic standpoints. The standpoint of black women will differ from that of white women, and yet again from that of white men, and so on.

Epistemic standpoints stem from our perspective on the world but are more than that. Importantly, standpoints are achievements. Groups can acquire standpoints by reflecting on their experiences and coming to understand them in light of their social position. A subject doesn't simply have a feminist standpoint in virtue of being a woman, for example. After all, she might see the world in a way which happens to accord with being situated as a woman but without realizing this, for example, if she gets unfairly overlooked for jobs but doesn't note this and just thinks that this is how things are. In fact, standpoints aren't achieved by individuals *per se*, but rather, communities. And standpoint competence can be acquired from many different spaces. This includes universities, but also through consciousness-raising community groups, podcasts, social media, and simply talking to friends.

Also, I should emphasize that standpoints stem from one's *social* position. As such, standpoint epistemologists don't look to essentialize groups such as women in terms of biological kinds. Rather, this approach identifies certain commonalities in the ways in which certain subjects are treated and perceived.

While there are many different standpoints, those associated with less privileged social groups enjoy distinct epistemic advantages. For example, women are better placed than men to learn about many things due to their position in society, such as the contours of sexual harassment and the expectations that women face concerning housework and childrearing. They would also be more aware of implicit biases. This isn't to say that women can't then share this information such that men couldn't come to occupy this standpoint. But nevertheless, those with the feminist standpoint constitute authorities on these issues and women certainly bear an epistemic advantage because of their social position. I'll take it in this paper that those not belonging to a marginalized group can also access these standpoints, but it'll be harder for them, and they must rely on those occupying the relevant positions to help them do so.[17]

We can further support this claim concerning epistemic advantage by noting several qualifications. First, recall that standpoints are achievements. Therefore I'm not saying that women are authorities on certain matters simply in virtue of being women; rather, they must also have reflected on their experiences. Also, I should emphasize that occupying a standpoint gives certain groups an epistemic advantage on some matters, especially those concerning oppression and societal expectations. But this isn't to say that those occupying the standpoint will be authorities about everything. Due to societal forces, less privileged individuals might lack the kind of knowledge that is generally transmitted through formal education.[18]

There are many possible ways in which standpoints can accord certain groups with epistemic advantages—noting some of these will help further strengthen the claim because it doesn't rely on just one possible machinery. For example:

(1) Experiences associated with certain groups and facts about their lives can, to use Harding's (1991, 1992) phrase, serve as the "starting off point" for developing new theories and conceptual resources. For example, concepts including "sexual harassment", "gaslighting", "racial profiling", and "mass incarceration" all seek to categorize forms of oppression. These concepts then help to put one in the

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position to acquire knowledge, such as that *sexual harassment is prevalent,* since knowledge requires the application of the relevant concepts.[19]

(2) Members of marginalized groups occupy an insider-outsider status (Collins 1986).[20] They need to work within the system and navigate its rules, and yet aren't fully accepted by it. As such, these groups can become more aware of the ways in which society works which others might overlook or take for granted. If you want to learn conjugation rules for the past perfect tense in English, you should ask someone who speaks English fluently as their second language as opposed to a native speaker. Similarly, you should turn to women living in a patriarchal society if you want to learn about gender-based norms.

(3) We can cash out the epistemic advantage possessed by marginalized groups in ways other than standpoint theory, and I am happy if another framework is preferred. For example, recall the notion of "epistemic avoidance" or, in Mill's (2017) terminology, "active ignorance." The upshot is that, because privileged groups systematically and wilfully overlook certain facts concerning oppression, disadvantaged groups have a relative epistemic advantage in virtue of noticing these matters.[21]

So, marginalized social groups have important epistemic advantages in virtue of their standpoints. This knowledge broadly centres around discrimination and oppression: the sometimes subtle ways in which individuals might be disadvantaged and the mechanics by which this is brought about.

3.2 Standpoint epistocracy

Standpoint epistocracy gives power to the most knowledgeable and competent, where this is cashed out in terms familiar from standpoint epistemology. Its epistocrats consist of groups with the epistemic advantage stemming from the standpoints of those less privileged in society. So, unlike Brennan's epistocracy, my epistocrats aren't those with the greatest formal knowledge of social science and history *per se*, but rather, the greatest standpoint competence. This competence consists in a knowledge of oppression stemming from certain social standpoints, and a relative freedom from bias—in our case, implicit racism, sexism, ableism, etc. My account specifically concerns the epistemic advantage accruing to standpoints. One therefore wouldn't count as a "standpoint epistocrat" simply in virtue of belonging to a marginalized group, although these groups occupy an especially good position to acquire that competence.[22]

I should emphasize several things about the content of this knowledge. First, the epistemic advantage has a broad scope, which equips standpoint epistocrats to speak on many issues. It's not simply that, say, those with the feminist standpoint only have epistemic privilege regarding so-called "women's issues" like abortion. Rather, the standpoint of oppressed groups furnishes them with insights concerning all aspects of life, including government spending, school curricula, policing and what counts as a "crime", immigration policies, working practices and employment law … While I say in this paper that standpoint epistocrats have a deep knowledge of oppression, they in fact have a broad range of insights because of how oppression interweaves with so many aspects of society.

Second, standpoint knowledge intersects with a knowledge of history, economics, social science, and politics. While standpoint knowledge differs sharply from *Brennan's*

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construal of social science, different standpoints give their bearers distinct ways of interpreting all these disciplines. Further, one way whereby power structures manifest themselves is in what counts as understanding, say, economics or history.

Third, my epistocrats occupy a privileged position to both specify the outcomes that society should aim for and also the means by which to achieve them. It's not that my epistocrats can only say what society should be like in broad terms—that is, more equal—but must leave all discussion of how to achieve this to economists and social scientists. As such, I disagree with Brennan when he writes that individuals who would fail his test "might know what kinds of *outcomes* would serve their interests, but unless they have tremendous social scientific knowledge, they are unlikely to know how to vote for politicians or policies that will produce these favored outcomes" (2016, 227). And I also disagree with Lenczewska (2021, 648, 651) who argues that the epistemic competencies highlighted by standpoint theory give subjects improved knowledge of good outcomes if not the means to achieve them. Nevertheless, for example, it seems plausible that those with the feminist standpoint won't just have an advantage in knowing that academic philosophy as a discipline should aim for greater gender parity. This, after all, is already widely accepted. Women are also well placed to know the ways in which universities should bring this about since they have a greater awareness of various things that make an academic career harder and less desirable for women. (Strategies would include more inclusive reading lists, changes to the format of talks, etc.). After all, those who lack certain standpoints will be less likely to be aware of what causes particular harms, for example, the precise things that might cause women to feel unwelcome in male-dominated professions. Knowledge of these causes would presumably help one in determining how best to ameliorate these harms. As I discuss later, there will be individuals with the relevant standpoints working within the social sciences and economics; it would be surprising if their insider-outside status had no influence on their ability to determine the best means of bringing about desired ends.

Let's consider an example of the sort of group which would help comprise my epistocracy and the sorts of decisions it would make. The Black Lives Matter movement embodies a standpoint stemming from the perspectives of black individuals. BLM members are experts on discrimination, power imbalance, and the many disadvantages facing black individuals. As well as forms of oppression which governments have failed to address, the movement also highlights oppressions and harms that governments themselves commit (especially the US government, but also many others). This includes racial profiling and disproportionately high incarceration rates of black men. One proposed policy is the BREATHE Act which "calls for divestment from the carceral system, and investment of those funds into new forms of public safety. . . . The BREATHE Act presented a new vision of public safety that invests in our community, via education, housing, mental health resources, food safety, and the environment instead of utilizing the punishment paradigm" (Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation 2021–22, 8). A historical example of successful long-term change was the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 which prohibits discrimination across a wide range of domains. This is notable not just because disabled groups successfully pushed for some sort of change (i.e., greater rights for disabled individuals in a general sense). They also played a pivotal role in the content of the legislation itself and ensuring it applied as broadly as possible (see the account in Mayerson 1992).[23]

Standpoint epistocracy could take various forms and strengths. In particular, we might place constraints at the level of the electorate (as Brennan does), the level of government, or both. We could also propose a fully epistocratic system of governance, or

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a hybrid version retaining elements of democracy. I'll now list some ways in which we could go. I think it's worthwhile emphasizing the various options and the concessions I could make; even if the reader objects to one way of cashing it out, or even my proposal in its strongest form, I can still point to other possibilities.[24] The following three options are meant to illustrate just how open and flexible my main claim is. I'll revisit the question of how best to institutionalize epistocracy in §4.2.

Restricted suffrage

The most obvious option would be to parallel Brennan's account and restrict the electorate, e.g. through testing. We could make voting contingent on passing a standpoint competency exam designed by community groups. I would face special difficulties with this tactic, although they are not insurmountable. By its very nature, this sort of knowledge is hard to test for: it may well be non-propositional and highly situation-dependent. Also, if the questions were too simple, it would be easy for individuals to insincerely provide the answer they think is required. The exam would have to consist of open-ended questions that allow for long-form answers to gauge genuine understanding, and also probe for responses to richly described scenarios.

Restricted government: pure epistocracy

Alternatively, we might enact standpoint epistocracy at the level of government itself; I suspect that this would be easier than formulating and assessing the ideal test. The aim here wouldn't simply be to diversify government in a way which directly mirrors actual social demographics but rather, to have as many individuals from marginalized groups in power as possible.

Most straightforwardly, we could introduce a system akin to Plato's philosopher kings, where the ruling party consists just of epistocrats. In our case, of course, philosopher kings would be joined by philosopher queens and non-binary monarchs. Membership could be self-governing or perhaps managed by an independent committee of community groups who themselves also have standpoint competence.

Restricted government: epistocracy-democracy hybrid

More options present themselves if we combine epistocracy with democracy such that we preserve near-universal suffrage but place certain limitations at the level of government. In being less radical, we could implement the hybrid system more easily and citizens would be more likely to accept it.[25] At the very least, enacting a system like this would serve as a good transition point before potentially progressing further. And even combining democracy with standpoint epistocracy would be a significant departure from current systems of governance.

One option would be to try and ensure that as many electoral candidates as possible have standpoint competence. This might be a matter of: making potential candidates pass an in-depth exam (the lower numbers would make it more feasible to test individuals with the required degree of subtlety); drawing candidates directly from community groups; introducing quotas for candidates from marginalized groups along with programs encouraging people to run for government from activism and community backgrounds.[26] Or instead of placing epistocratic constraints on who runs for office, we might have a group of unelected standpoint epistocrats to work alongside "normally" elected officials. This would essentially be an epistocratic version of the UK's

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House of Lords. As such, it would be particularly suitable in the UK context; indeed, this similarity might make it easier to implement and more likely to be accepted. The House of Epistocrats would again be composed of, say, equalities activists. It would also have significant powers, ideally beyond those of the House of Lords, for example, that of veto. The most appropriate range of powers would be up for debate, but it would be important to ensure that under this hybrid position the epistocrats are still able to enact their decisions. Inclusion in the House could be reassessed periodically to ensure that its members continue to have the standpoints associated with marginalized groups, to mitigate the risk that occupying positions of power might diminish this standpoint.[27]

Note my focus on bringing people into power from community groups. Community groups and those involved in consciousness-raising will already have a strong reflective standpoint, and therefore will be more likely to have the important competence that standpoint epistocracy requires. It is important to have a diverse a group as possible. Currently, the path to careers in politics (including independent think tanks) runs primarily via universities. As Táíwò (2020a) writes, currently, when we defer to people from marginalized groups, it's usually only to members who are in some sense unrepresentative in occupying a degree of privilege in comparison to others.[28] He observes that:

> From a societal standpoint, the "most affected" by the social injustices we associate with politically important identities like gender, class, race, and nationality are disproportionately likely to be incarcerated, underemployed, or part of the 44 percent of the world's population without internet access—and thus both left out of the rooms of power and largely ignored by the people in the rooms of power. (Táíwò 2020a)

A standpoint epistocracy must not just be composed of the few professional politicians who happen to be black women. Rather, we must empower individuals from a range of backgrounds.

That said, Brennan could also accommodate a hybrid position along these grounds.[29] He discusses a hybrid model which supplements current procedures with an epistocratic council with veto power (Brennan 2016, 215–20). But this system would still encounter the demographic objection, albeit to a lesser degree. The epistocratic council would still lack important knowledge which would be problematic if they held significant powers to overrule voters.

While I don't to commit to one formulation here, I tentatively think that a "House of Epistocrats" would be a good starting point. I further highlight strengths of this type of position in §4.2. It would also serve as an important corrective if we maintain that democracy has intrinsic value but which can still be outweighed. At any rate, we have scope for further research now that standpoint epistocracy is on the table.

4. Defending standpoint epistocracy

I've now introduced a new form of epistocracy. But why should we accept it? Let's recall Brennan's argument for epistocracy. He made two main claims: (1) democracy is an incompetent decision-making procedure but epistocracy is better; (2) we should prefer a competent system of governance over an incompetent one. I argued earlier that Brennan's epistocrats aren't clearly more competent after all. Even if epistocracy

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epistemically improves on democracy in some respects, it would be worse in others. Even if Brennan's system ensures voters possess certain forms of social scientific and political knowledge, they would lack standpoint competence.

But we can retarget Brennan's argument to instead successfully argue for *standpoint* epistocracy. In this context, we can make an especially strong case concerning relative competence and its importance. I'll discuss the two steps in turn; the second will also involve emphasizing how my account overcomes the demographic objection. As such, standpoint epistocracy improves on both Brennan's epistocracy and also democracy.

4.1 Why standpoint competence matters

Why should we care whether decision-makers have standpoint competence? Here we can strengthen the Competence Principle. In short, the stakes are especially high regarding the matters relevant for standpoint competence such that it's especially unjust for political decisions to be made by those without it. First, though, I should emphasize again that I can accept that democracy might have intrinsic value; nevertheless, I maintain that the following concerns will be strong enough to outweigh them.

Recall Brennan's argument that it's unjust for incompetently made high-stakes decisions to be imposed on others. Even if the decision happens to be right and no one is in fact harmed, the decision-makers still risk making mistakes. But importantly, the stakes are especially high concerning matters relevant to standpoint epistemology, namely the oppression of marginalized groups. The harms are both more frequent and often more pronounced.[30] Many existing social structures make the loss of life and liberty far more likely for them. Also, the fact that such individuals are often already disadvantaged means that they'll feel the harms more keenly, for example, a slight loss of income will affect someone with an already low income more than someone on a higher salary. Let me here note just a few relevant harms facing oppressed groups in particular: disproportionately high levels of imprisonment and police brutality (black and Latino men); continued taxation in face of the wage gap (most of the relevant groups); continued lack of physical access to many spaces (individuals with disabilities); death from malnourishment or lack of healthcare.

Many of these problems stem from specifically standpoint incompetence as opposed to the sort of incompetence Brennan targets. This is because, in practice, politicians carry a lot of influence in decision-making. They also have a lot of traditional political and economic knowledge and can correct for some of the electorate's factual mistakes. Yet, as I reiterate below, marginalized groups are still systematically harmed despite this. It therefore seems to result from politicians' and voters' lack of standpoint competence.

We can therefore say, then, that it's especially unjust to be subject to political decisions made by those lacking standpoint knowledge. We should prefer a decision-making system which does have this competence over one that does not.

4.2 The relative competence of the decision-making group under standpoint epistocracy

I have a negative and positive task when arguing for standpoint epistocracy's relative epistemic prowess: to say why alternatives are lacking and also why mine is better. The negative component states that traditional epistocracy and democracy are flawed decision-making procedures. We've already looked at traditional epistocracy in this

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regard: Brennan's epistocrats lack an important form of competence (the following section will say more about why it's so important). Does democracy fare much better?

No. First, many voters lack standpoint competence.[31] (By "standpoint competence", I mean the sort of competence that consists in possessing standpoint knowledge and acting in good faith in accordance with it.) For instance, many white people don't know about racial profiling, implicit racial bias, and police brutality. This partly stems from epistemic avoidance—overlooking important facts and relevant sources (e.g., the fact that black men are disproportionately jailed and profiled, and that many people are imprisoned for petty crimes). White individuals also have less data from which to theorize, for example, in not living with the threat of being stopped by the police at any moment. Note that this is the most charitable interpretation of current events, and assumes that privileged groups still act in good faith—but there's reason to doubt even that. Even if explicit prejudice is less common, implicit bias is nevertheless pervasive.[32]

Further, it isn't just that large portions of the electorate under a democracy lack standpoint competence; governing bodies do as well. In this way, my case against democracy is stronger than Brennan's. Brennan concedes to his opponents that democracies in fact often produce good results because governing bodies do a lot of the work and can correct for the electorate's mistakes (2016, 199–200). But this concedes too much. Democracies often *in fact* make many bad decisions because they lack standpoint competence at both the level of the electorate *and* also that of governing bodies. For example, governments are only just now starting to fully acknowledge the issue of police brutality and widespread false imprisonment. Governing bodies often lack this competence because it's harder for marginalized groups to break into politics as a profession, and because epistemic injustice means that those in power are less likely to listen to their voices. Indeed, a flat-footed argument for my view would observe that marginalized groups are harmed under current democracies by bad decisions as a result of standpoint incompetence at multiple levels of political decision-making; since harming people is wrong, we have reason to reject democracy.

At this point, the defender of democracy may well agree that democracy faces problems as things stand but point to the possibility of reform. There have been various suggestions. For example, see the defence of proportional voting in Guinier (1992) and Guinier and Torres (2002) as a way of ensuring that those in the minority nevertheless have their interests accounted for, unlike with "winner takes all" districting. And multiple authors have argued for the importance of including representatives from marginalized groups in decision-making bodies as part of an ideal democracy. Here see Phillips' (1995) "politics of presence", Williams' (1998) "group-based" account of representation, and Young (2000, 1990) and Mansbridge (1999) on "descriptive representation". Indeed, Young goes so far as to suggest allowing groups a veto "regarding specific policies that affect [them] directly" (1990, 184). She also writes that appropriate representation and giving everyone an "empowered voice" might involve creating a body with more members from certain groups than strictly maps onto the electorate as a whole (1990, 187–88).

Here I will say several things. First, standpoint epistocracy still poses a significant alternative to these options since it doesn't simply function to give marginalized groups equal voice, but rather, disproportionately more. It also allocates power to those with the relevant competences and not simply individuals who belong to marginalized groups (although this might function in practice as a proxy). Last, recall that I am also open to a hybrid position; accounts that also, say, advocate giving marginalized groups the power

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of veto would therefore count as allies. I have nevertheless shown that we can converge on this sort of strategy from an unexpected starting point: epistocracy.

So democracy (or at least many actual forms of democracy) and traditional epistocracy are poor decision-making methods in important ways. On the other hand, we would expect a standpoint epistocracy to be better. Most obviously, my proposal ensures that decision-makers possess standpoint knowledge, rendering it highly effective in counteracting oppression and harms to marginalized groups.[33]

At this point, though, we might worry that my account also faces a version of the demographic objection. Recall the three strands to the objection: the decision-making group loses other forms of expertise, epistocrats would not communicate effectively with other groups prior to decision-making, and homogeneity. We might worry that in prioritizing standpoint knowledge, the decision-making group on my proposal would lack other forms of competence. I don't deny that a degree in economics gives one valuable information. Perhaps also my epistocrats wouldn't listen to these other experts when making decisions. And we might also worry, with Landemore, that my ideal group would itself be homogeneous.

But a standpoint epistocracy is especially well placed to address all these strands.

First, the standpoints of disadvantaged groups also contain within them the perspective of privileged groups. This is because, as we have seen, one way of characterizing marginalized standpoints is in terms of an insider-outsider status. Those from oppressed groups must navigate the rules of privilege. Indeed, they can understand aspects of the privileged perspective better than privileged groups themselves, in having to learn its rules so explicitly. As Mills (2017) discusses, an epistemic asymmetry holds between privileged and marginalized groups, and black individuals often understand the white perspective far better than vice versa.[34] For example, he writes that: "Often for their very survival, blacks have been forced to become lay anthropologists studying the strange culture, customs, and mindset of the 'white tribe' that has such frightening power over them that in certain time periods whites can even determine their life or death on a whim" (2017, 53). This applies at a general level to all those who participate in the everyday life of a dominant culture and navigate its rules, and also specific domains. These might be academic fields. Collins discusses the distinct epistemic advantage that black women working as sociologists have in the area—they operate within mainstream paradigms and yet are able to notice its gaps. But it also pertains to non-academic fields of expertise, such as the intimate knowledge of their employers that domestic staff can develop (on both, see Collins 1986). One might object that individuals from marginalized groups may well follow these rules without seeing them for what they are. Yet recall the importance of reflection in acquiring standpoint knowledge, and the ways in which we might ensure for this such as by seeking members of the House of Epistocrats from community organizations.

This asymmetry would also apply to knowledge of the values of the dominant group and not just the bare rules of society (e.g. the underlying moral values, and also cultural ones).[35] Individuals need an understanding of underlying values in order to navigate society proficiently, although this isn't to say that they must in fact agree with them. For instance, those from marginalized groups must grasp the underlying values of independence and self-reliance in order to navigate societies where this is prized, understand what sorts of artworks are held in high regard in order to make appropriate conversation, and so on. And it's at least more likely that those from marginalized groups would have this grasp of the values of privileged groups than vice versa. They would have been more exposed to explanations of why certain things are important and

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why, exposed to the role they play in mainstream society, taught about mainstream cultural works as part of their education, and so on.

Here we might worry that that this still doesn't suffice to mitigate other forms of epistemic disadvantage that marginalized groups face. After all, standpoint epistemology's epistemic advantage thesis has limited scope. And marginalized groups indeed face barriers in acquiring formal education—because of systemic racism, few sociologists are in fact black women. One reply is to say that standpoint knowledge's significance outweighs other epistemic disadvantages, especially if our project is ameliorative. But I can also appeal to the following two discussions.

Second, those in power can still listen to others and call on other experts when needed. For example, the "House of Standpoint Epistocrats" can commission researchers and draw on economists' and political scientists' expertise. Crucially, standpoint epistocrats would be more likely to fruitfully engage with other experts and be receptive to them, unlike the electorate under Brennan's account and also the ruling parties in a democracy who often fail to listen to marginalized groups. Epistemic avoidance means that they overlook information that would challenge their dominance, even when affected groups try to inform them. Also, interrelatedly, testimonial injustice means that those in power undervalue the testimony of those from marginalized groups (Fricker 2007). We see this even within democracies, and would only expect it to worsen under Brennan's epistocracy, or indeed also a broader epistocracy comprised of epistocrats selected under both metrics.

Giving power to standpoint epistocrats would mitigate this effect for several reasons (I therefore have a reply if the reader finds one unpersuasive). First, the insider-outsider status means that marginalized groups are more likely to recognize when privileged forms of knowledge are in fact useful. Compared with the inverse, marginalized groups will be more familiar with these tools and ways of thinking. Indeed, for my purposes, I only need it to be that marginalized groups are more familiar with the standpoints of privileged groups than vice versa, not that they have complete expertise. Note the epistemic asymmetry from earlier. Because these other frameworks will often be dominant, standpoint epistocrats will be more likely to know what they are, why they can be useful, and perhaps also have experience using them. This will be the case generally speaking, and also regarding specific domains. A feminist sociologist will have nevertheless been schooled in traditional techniques; this familiarity means that she knows when they'll be useful and when to call on a specialist. Or more mundanely, even the experience of managing one's own finances within mainstream society highlights the value of trained accountants and a degree of competency in economics. Here I can also emphasize the diversity that we'll hopefully achieve among the standpoint epistocrats and the domains that they are familiar with (in some cases, even the academic social science and economics prized by Brennan). And second, those from marginalized groups would also be more likely to possess the virtue of epistemic humility (Medina 2013, 43), meaning that they would recognize when they don't know something and seek advice. Specifically, they would be more likely to recognize gaps in epistemic resources because of their experience of seeing things that those in dominant groups do not (2013, 72–74). I can also emphasize that my proposal is that we give more power to those with standpoint competency, and not simply to individuals who happen to be members of marginalized groups. There is the possibility that assuming positions of power would mean one becomes less humble and ceases to occupy the relevant standpoint. In this case, we would reassess membership to ensure that standpoint epistocrats continue to possess the required competences.

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Here it'll help to address two contrasting worries. Perhaps standpoint epistocrats would defer to other experts too much.[36] But my proposal itself will help ameliorate this, since publicly acknowledging the epistocrats' epistemic competencies will surely lead to increased confidence. Alternatively, we might worry, *pace* the above paragraph, that my epistocrats would distrust other experts. Estlund (2008, ch. 11; 2003) observes that each demographic is biased in certain ways and objects to Brennan's epistocracy on the grounds that it would be overwhelmingly influenced by biases associated with formal education. Would standpoint epistocrats also be biased? Here, my opponent might, for example, point to distrust among black communities regarding the healthcare profession (which leads to low uptake of vaccines and low participation in studies). But insofar as biases are just specific ways of processing information, they have the potential to be epistemically beneficial. For instance, note the discussion of strong objectivity and bias in Harding (1992): a tendency to assess evidence in terms of the influence of oppression can actually help subjects to spot important gaps, and reach better and more objective conclusions. In our specific case, note that in fact marginalized groups have good reason to distrust the medical profession following a long history of abuses. This included the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, in which researchers observed a group of black men with syphilis for 40 years without sharing the diagnosis or offering treatment.[37] In fact, Alsan et al. (2019) found that meeting with a doctor who is also black increases uptake of preventative procedures, due to improved communication.[38] It isn't that marginalized groups are suspicious of, say, medical experts *per se*; rather, they're suspicious of medical experts when they have reason to find them untrustworthy. The task is how to make these fields more trustworthy—something which my standpoint epistocrats are ideally placed to advise on.

Third, a group composed of marginalized individuals will be much more diverse than Brennan's epistocrats. Privilege in itself is homogeneous, and there are only a few ways to be supremely privileged (e.g., white, well-educated, male, rich, able-bodied). But there are many ways to belong to oppressed groups and they intersect, meaning that my decision-making body would nevertheless be highly diverse.

It's worth emphasizing how standpoint competence wouldn't track formal education: it's not that my epistocrats would only consist of individuals who have attended university, or who have time for a lot of reading. Standpoint competence is much easier to acquire than a knowledge of microeconomics in this respect, which would require dedicated study and an effort to keep up to date. But marginalized groups already have a lot of data from their everyday lives. These data will be salient, and constantly updating; all the individuals need to do is reflect. And the prompts and frameworks for this reflection could come from anywhere—university education, but also social media, podcasts, and friends.

At this point, let me revisit our options regarding institutionalizing standpoint epistocracy, and whether to place limits at the electoral level (e.g., with a voting test) or the governing bodies themselves (e.g., "Epistocratic Monarchs," candidate selection, or a "House of Epistocrats"). All these proposals would, as much as possible, allocate power to those with the relevant competencies. But the latter sort of proposal seems to bear additional epistemic advantages. Governing bodies are well placed to acquire further information if needed and commission research. They would be able to work with other experts in order to make specialized fields such as the medical profession more trustworthy. Also, I suspect that this framework could better make use of diversity. A voting test would filter the electorate and the individuals who are able to choose political leaders, but this isn't to say anything about the options from which they can choose. Due

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to existing structures, marginalized groups face greater barriers to entering politics; it might be that none of the candidates truly speak to the electorate and they must vote for the candidate they dislike least. But recall the way in which interventions at the level of government can draw individuals from a range of backgrounds. It would therefore help ensure intersectionality in a way that would better effect outcomes.

As a result of the above discussion, I conclude that standpoint epistocrats will be better at fairly assessing information and listening to advice than other groups. We therefore have reason to give the final say to these groups in particular. At this point, I should acknowledge the limit to which I can defend some of these ideas (e.g., the epistemic advantage and asymmetry theses) in the present paper. But I can direct any still-skeptical readers to the rich body of existing literature defending standpoint epistemology.

The above, therefore, is an argument against the suggestion in Lenczewska (2021). She argues that, taking into account a broader construal of political competency, an epistocracy would in fact include members of disadvantaged groups *alongside* those proposed by Brennan. But, first, I have argued that just including those with standpoint competence would nevertheless bring many of the same epistemic advantages as including those just skilled in political science. This is in virtue of their insider-outsider perspective and also through their ability to consult external parties which would be enhanced by epistemic virtues such as humility. Lenczewska discusses these epistemic advantages as reasons for including such groups in the epistocratic council (2021, 647), but they also reduce the urgency to include Brennan's epistocrats. Further, a council just consisting of those with standpoint competence would help avoid silencing on the part of privileged groups, something which we risk manifesting in the microcosm of the epistocratic council as it already does in broader society. Lenczewska argues that epistemic vices on the part of privileged groups mean that we need to include marginalized groups within the council itself as opposed to simply relying on their testimony (2021, 649–50). But it would mean that we risk individuals from these privileged groups also having these vices and therefore silencing other members. This would especially be the case if there was the impression that Brennan's epistocrats were the only authorities regarding the ways by which we bring about certain ends. Lenczewska does say that "the norms to which the deliberations of this epistocratic council would be held would not differ from the norms applicable to any deliberative collective aimed at political decision-making" (2021, 655). But this is not to say that deliberative norms would be abided by, since we already have such norms but they aren't sufficiently followed.

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The two steps of my argument together, then, lead to my conclusion. It's unjust to impose decisions that have been made without standpoint competence (i.e., decisions made without the epistemic advantage of certain standpoints). Standpoint epistocracy would give power to those with the relevant competence, thus improving in this regard on both traditional epistocracy and democracy. Therefore, we have reason to implement standpoint epistocracy. And I can also give a more flat-footed argument: many individuals belonging to oppressed groups are harmed under democracies as a result of bad decisions, but standpoint epistocracy would make better decisions in this respect. As such, I argue for a more radical conclusion than Lenczewska (2021) who writes that, once we construe the epistocratic council as consisting of those with either standpoint or traditional political competencies, it may well include everyone such that epistocracy ceases to be an alternative to democracy. In arguing specifically for an epistocracy

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composed of those with standpoint competence, I have proposed this as a clear alternative to democracy, and indeed one that has a surprising amount in its favour.

At the very least, I hope to have shown that standpoint epistocracy is stronger than traditional versions of epistocracy such as Brennan's. Let me end by reiterating its advantages and the supporting argument's comparative strength: the stakes are especially high regarding decisions made without standpoint competence, such that it's especially unjust to impose these decisions on individuals; it's not just that large portions of the electorate lack the competence in question, governing bodies do as well; as a result, there isn't just a risk that bad decisions will be made under democracy and traditional epistocracy—many are in fact made and marginalized groups are harmed in a range of ways; my account overcomes the version of the demographic argument we targeted at Brennan, since my proposed version of epistocracy doesn't disenfranchise marginalized groups. And it overcomes a reworked formulation due to the nature of the standpoints and groups in question.

5. Conclusion

This paper introduced a novel system of governance: standpoint epistocracy. Not only can epistocracy appeal to those from the progressive left, which is noteworthy in itself. Further, the resulting position is especially appealing, and appears preferable to other systems, or at the very least, traditional epistocracy. This has only been to make first steps. We might wonder about the precise ways of cashing out my account, how it could be best put into practice, and how the proponent of *standpoint* epistocracy might respond to remaining worries concerning epistocracy. But this paper hopes to have introduced the position as a powerful alternative to Brennan's epistocracy and, more tentatively, to democracy itself.

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Notes

1 I came into contact with Lenczewska (2021) after writing this paper, and work on these articles proceeded independently.

2 See Baumtrog (2021) for an argument that we should extend franchise to younger teenagers on the grounds that many have a similar level of competence to 16 year olds.

3 See Brennan (2016, ch. 6).

4 Indeed, a growing literature questions purely proceduralist defences of democracy. Anderson (2006), Estlund (2008, 2003), and Landemore (2013, 2012) argue for democracy on at least partly epistemic grounds. Relatedly, Peter (2016, 2008) offers a purely procedural defence which is nevertheless epistemic.

5 Mulligan (2015, §4) makes a similar point when defending epistocracy, Somin (2016) does so in arguing for decentralization, and Guerrero (2014) appeals to voter ignorance in arguing that voters can't meaningfully hold governments accountable under democracy. Another key proponent of the voter ignorance thesis is Caplan (2006).

6 For a related criticism, see Arlen and Rossi (2019).

7 Verba et al are concerned primarily with political participation, but we can expect them to be tightly linked. See also Dow's (2009) discussion of the differences in the "returns" in political knowledge from those resources.

8 In the contexts of race and gender, authors have argued that the relevant gap closes when experimenters instead: test for practical knowledge about accessing public services Stolle and Gidengil (2010); take into

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account substantive differences in how groups see the political domain owing to different experiences Abrajano (2025); test facts which are equally salient for all demographics Pérez (2015); test for knowledge of gender representation Dolan (2011).

9 See also Bhatia (2018, 6–8) on the merits of critiquing epistocracies on epistemic grounds.

10 Bhatia makes a related but less committal point on (2018, 8–10).

11 See Mills (2017) on "white ignorance" and Medina (2013) on "active ignorance".

12 See Bagg's (2018a) discussion of motivated reasoning in public deliberation, and how even highly educated people are nevertheless subject to this.

13 See also Medina (2013) on the way in which privileged groups fail to converse well and listen to others, e.g. on (2013, 72).

14 See Intemann (2010) for a similar point regarding standpoint epistemology and feminist empiricism.

15 For other discussions of the demographic objection, see also Bagg (2018b), Estlund (2003), Klocksiem (2019), Moraro (2018).

16 For helpful overviews, see: Anderson (2020), Grasswick (2018), Intemann (2010), Saul (2003, 240–50), and Wylie (2003). Proponents include Collins (1986) Fricker (1999), Harding (1992), Hartsock (1998), Pohlhaus (2012), Rolin (2009), Toole (2020), Wylie (2003). On the notion of differentiated knowers, for example, see Grasswick (2018, §2.1). This is not to imply, though, that standpoint epistemology is to be located simply within this set of authors.

17 Anderson (2020) notes this as a consequence of seeing standpoint knowledge as acquired by groups.

18 See e.g. Medina (2013, 40–42).

19 See Fricker (1999), Harding (1992; 1991, 121–24), Pohlhaus (2012), Toole (2020, 10–12; 2019, 604–08).

20 See Wylie (2003) and Harding (1991, 124–25, 131–32) for discussion.

21 On the relation between standpoint theory and the active ignorance approach, and the epistemic advantage thesis, see McGlynn (2019).

22 As such, this gives me one way of replying to the possible objection that certain groups still make what seem to be bad decisions. Perhaps some of these voters lack the relevant standpoint, and indeed, being privileged in certain respects will make certain facts less salient to them.

23 Further work would concern what made this campaign and reform so successful, so as to determine how best to implement a standpoint epistocracy. Londoño (2023) writes about the failures of proposals for police defunding. While there were originally calls to reduce police numbers in Minnesota, this eventually happened in an unplanned way due to staff departures and resulted in increased violent crime. But projects like this and prison reform could only work alongside wide-ranging developments in social services, education, education, and so on. A standpoint epistocracy would give groups these powers for widespread reform. It would also give them the opportunity and freedom to produce proposals of the required degree of detail. And while some proposed reforms might not work, the epistocracy would have the ability to invest in localized trials and adjust the course of action as required.

24 We could also combine this paper's insights with a form of *enfranchisement lottery*, as discussed in Brennan (2018), López-Guerra (2011) and endorsed by Guerrero (2014). This system randomly chooses a small electorate or single-issue group from the general population to then be extensively educated on relevant issues before making decisions. Indeed, Guerrero (2021) offers an argument for the system based on standpoint theory and the fact that, in general, "randomly chosen citizens might actually do better than elected representatives" because the selection is "likely to include individuals with a greater range of life experiences and vocational skills" thus ameliorating "the evidential and intellectual diversity of the group" (2021, 174). But I would add two caveats. (1) The group must be educated so as to furnish them with standpoint competence. (2) I suspect that selection process couldn't be completely random, and that our group would have to include a disproportionately larger number of individuals from marginalized groups. This is because they are at the very least far better placed to acquire the relevant standpoints than those from privileged groups. This would be to endorse something like Lenczewska's suggestion that the council members would be best selected from minority groups at random (2021, 654).

25 This would also help us address Estlund's (2008, ch. 11; 2003) qualified acceptability requirement.

26 The use of diversity quotas would only be an indirect measure of whether someone possesses a certain standpoint, but nevertheless belonging to the relevant social demographic greatly improves one's access to that standpoint.

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27 Another hybrid position could involve trying to adapt Landa and Pevnick's (2021) discussion according to which a well-designed representative democracy would function as an epistocracy. In our case, though, our goal would be to incorporate specifically *standpoint* epistocracy.
28 See relatedly (Táíwò 2020b).
29 Brennan discusses a hybrid model which supplements current procedures with an epistocratic council with veto power (2016, 215–20).
30 Moraro (2018, §4) also makes this second point.
31 Also, as Brennan (2018, 66–67) observes, ruling parties under a democracy tend to give disproportionate weight to the views of the super-rich at the expense of the marginalized groups.
32 For worries facing democracy from the perspective of inclusion, see most relevantly e.g., Dieleman (2015) (who raises the potential for epistemic injustice) and Young 2000 (esp. chs 1 and 2 for discussion of deliberative norms that serve to exclude certain groups).
33 For related epistemic arguments in favour of reforms to make democratic structures more inclusive, see e.g. Williams (1998, esp. ch. 4), Young (2000, esp. ch. 3, for discussion of "situated knowledges" and the ability to identify biases), Mansbridge (1999 on shared experience). But see my above comment on simply reforming democracy.
34 See also Medina (2013, 197–98).
35 Thank you to an anonymous reviewer.
36 This might be because of the "feeling of intellectual inferiority" which, as Medina (2013 41–42) writes, can result from oppression.
37 On patterns of distrust and possible explanations see e.g. Clark (2009), Frakt (2020), and Wells and Gowda (2020) For a discussion in the context of Covid-19 vaccine uptake in Britain, see Schraer (2021).
38 See also Wells and Gowda (2020, 1).

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Sophie Keeling is a Ramón y Cajal research fellow at the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (Madrid, Spain), and a member of the METIS group. She has previously held positions in University College Dublin, the University of Barcelona, and the University of Edinburgh, and completed her doctorate at the University of Southampton. Her interests span epistemology, the philosophy of mind, and normativity.

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