1.1 EPISTEMIC COMPETENCE: A MINIMAL REQUIREMENT OF GOOD GOVERNMENT

Many factors feed into our assessment of the quality of government.¹ But sheer competence—governments knowing what they are doing, knowing how to achieve what they attempt—surely must be high on that list. Though sheer competence is not the only thing on that list,² without at least minimal competence good government is impossible.

The perception of incompetence, much more than anything to do with the war in Vietnam, is what led to George McGovern's landslide defeat by Richard Nixon in 1972.³ The sheer incompetence of the White House's handling of the bungled Watergate burglary—much more than concerns that the president was a 'crook'—is what led to the unravelling of Nixon's presidency two years later.⁴ What forced Margaret Thatcher's resignation as British Prime Minister was her stubborn insistence upon persevering with a poll tax that was not only inequitable, but, more fundamentally, simply unworkable.⁵ When survey researchers

¹ See for example the array of variables in the Quality of Government dataset http://www.qog.pol.gu.se/>.

Running for president on a promise to be competent and honest is thin gruel, Greider (1988) presciently commented at the start of Michael Dukakis's doomed presidential campaign. Borosage (2016) recalled the remark when observing Hillary Clinton's 2016 campaign.

³ Popkin et al. 1976, pp. 793–5, 799–803. Nominating as his vice-presidential running mate someone with a history of mental illness and electric shock therapy for it, without having discovered that fact in background checking before the nomination, represented a catastrophic failure of due diligence from which McGovern's campaign never recovered.

⁴ Starting with the botched Watergate break-in itself and continuing through a series of ham-fisted attempts to cover up White House involvement in it, culminating in the clumsy erasure of a crucial 18 minutes on the Oval Office tapes, the whole episode was a comedy of never-ending errors. When Nixon proclaimed in his televised speech of 17 November 1973, 'I am not a crook,' almost as many Americans agreed as disagreed that 'President Nixon is a man of high integrity'; and even by the time he resigned eight months later, 35% of Americans still agreed (with 53% by that time disagreeing) (Ladd 1998, p. 32).

⁵ When the tax finally ceased to be collected in 1993, it emerged that some £2 billion to £2.5 billion of poll tax remained unpaid...Short of being dynamited, houses and flats cannot

ask people about their 'trust in government', they find that people's responses are as much driven by their trust in its competence as their trust in its values.⁶

Nor are those merely brute political facts about the judgments that voters pass on their leaders. They actually constitute good grounds for throwing the rascals out—or anyway they would do, if there were any reason to think the next lot would be more competent. There are genuine cases of rogues and scoundrels in government, to be sure. But much more common are bumbling incompetents, who simply are not up to the job—it is, after all, a pretty tough one.

The blunders of our governments derive from many sources.⁷ Evil intent is occasionally one of them. More often, however, government errors are owing more to a lack of due care and attention—misfeasance rather than malfeasance. Part and parcel of that is public officials simply not getting their facts right—a failure to reason properly from true facts to the logical conclusions. We should never underestimate the impact of sheer ignorance—crucial facts that were missing, dots that were not connected—in accounting for why public policies sometimes go so badly wrong.

From what generic flaws in decision-making do these blunders arise? Doubtless they are many and varied. But central among them is a lack of openness to inputs of outsiders. Certainly that rings true of our opening examples. Richard Nixon was notoriously secretive and paranoid, assiduously shielded from outsiders by a so-called Berlin Wall consisting of his two principal aides, Bob Haldeman and John Ehrlichman.⁸ Margaret Thatcher was notoriously stubborn, as well as privately insecure; her motto was, 'The lady's not for turning', and she continually batted away unwelcome advice. Had George McGovern's team canvassed more widely when conducting their background checks, they would not have made the electorally fatal mistake of nominating a running mate with a medical history that many voters thought rendered him unfit for office.

The phenomenon is a perfectly general one. There is a lot of knowledge that is widely dispersed across a given society, and political decision-making and public policymaking would be improved, and errors avoided, if that dispersed knowledge were taken more systematically into account. That is the background assumption guiding our work. The overall aim of this book is to help to identify the best ways of doing that.

simply disappear. Determined individuals can and did...[with] an estimated 700,000 adults disappearing from – or never appearing on – the electoral register' (King and Crewe 2013, pp. 59–60).

1.2 ASK AROUND

When you want to find out the facts, the best thing to do is usually just to 'ask around'. Seemingly the most natural thing to do is to 'ask the experts'. But notice, significantly, that even that injunction is in the plural. When one doctor advises you to undergo surgery, it is always a good idea to get a second opinion if time permits. And, if it's a serious operation, maybe a third and a fourth. And if they give conflicting advice, maybe more than that.

It is not as if there are no objective facts about the world, and it is all just a matter of opinion. There are facts. But all of us, even putative experts, have only imperfect access to them. That is why we seek advice on the facts from a diversity of sources and adopt schemes to institutionalize that practice. That is why scientific experts themselves convene consensus conferences to work out what facts all of them pretty much agree on, on the basis of evidence from their own labs, and what purported facts are still in dispute and require further research.

Why confine our enquiries to experts, though? Knowledge is widely distributed across society. ¹² Some people (putative 'experts') know a lot about a little. Many know a little about a lot. That is the 'many minds' or 'wisdom of the multitude' insight upon which fashionable contemporary techniques of 'crowdsourcing' are based. ¹³

Jokey factoids abound. The best estimate of the number of jellybeans in a jar, or the weight of a fatted ox at a county fair, can be derived from pooling the estimates of a great many people entering a competition to guess that number. ¹⁴ In other more serious contexts as well, pooling the information of large numbers of people through 'prediction markets' proves more reliable than expert judgements. That is true when it comes to predicting the sales of a Hewlett Packard printer or the outcomes of an Eli Lilly drug trial, for just two examples. ¹⁵ And as followers of politics will know, the Iowa Electronic Markets reliably outperform opinion polls in predicting the outcomes of a wide range of elections. ¹⁶

⁶ Rothstein and Stolle 2008, pp. 452–4, esp. Table 2, Model 9 (their 'effectiveness' is our 'competence'). See similarly Dahlberg and Holmberg 2014.

⁷ King and Crewe 2013. Similar themes are explored by Bovens and Hart (1995).

⁸ These men constituted what we will discuss under the heading of 'epistemic bottlenecks' in Chapter 17 of the book.

⁹ Tetlock 2005.
¹⁰ Lane 1999.
¹¹ NIH 2013.
¹² Hayek 1945.

¹³ Surowiecki 2004; Wolfers and Zitzewitz 2004; Hanson 2013. The 'many minds' phrase is from Sunstein (2006a; 2009) and Vermeule (2009b). The 'wisdom of the multitude' is Aristotle's phrase in Book 3, Chapter 11 of the *Politics*, recalled by Waldron (1995; 1999a, ch. 5; cf. Schwartzberg 2015). In arguing for the superiority of legislatures over courts or executives as decision makers, Waldron (2000; 2016, pp. 130–4) himself makes much of the fact that there are simply greater numbers of people involved in the decision-making in the first than the second two bodies.

¹⁴ Surowiecki 2004, pp. xi-xiii, 5. Sunstein 2006c, p. 24. The studies to which they refer are, respectively: Treynor 1987; Galton 1907c.

¹⁵ Chen and Plott 2002; Servan-Schreiber 2012.

¹⁶ That remained true even in the 2016 US presidential election, when the final average of the polls gave Trump only a 28.6% chance of winning (FiveThirtyEight 2016) but the Iowa Electronic Markets had the two candidates at virtually even money at the close of betting (IEM 2016). See more generally: Forsythe et al. 1992; Forsythe et al. 1999; Arrow et al. 2008. For details of its operation see the IEM website http://tippie.uiowa.edu/iem.

Crowdsourcing is an increasingly popular tool of government and public policymaking.¹⁷ Writing in the journal *Science* in 2008, a veritable who's who of social scientists—including three Nobel Laureates in Economics—advocate regulatory reforms that would widen the use of such techniques. They bookend (preface and conclude) their plea by saying:

There is mounting evidence that [prediction] markets can help to produce forecasts of event outcomes with a lower prediction error than conventional forecasting methods....

These markets have great potential for improving social welfare in many domains. 18

What's the trick? It's simple: the truth is constant and singular, while error is multiple and random. Randomly distributed errors cancel one another out, leaving the truth as the one strong signal that comes clearly through.¹⁹

1.3 POOLING INFORMATION AND JUDGEMENTS BASED ON IT

Not all knowledge is propositional knowledge. 'Know how' is as important as 'know that', when it comes to good government.²⁰ But knowledge of good techniques and procedures can be profitably shared as well. That process might perforce involve more judgement and less mechanical aggregation of reports of beliefs pro and con. Still, good practice too can be learned, and we can learn it from one another.

In this book, however, we will by and large be focusing upon propositional knowledge more narrowly, and ways of pooling judgements about it more mechanically. Among decision theorists, the most familiar way for doing so is through the use of Bayes' theorem, updating your own prior estimate of the probability of a proposition being true in light of reports from more-or-less trusted others that it is true. We will discuss briefly the convergence between that approach and ours in Section 3.3.1. But for the most part we shall here take another tack—one that is at once more intuitive and more political.

¹⁸ Arrow et al. 2008, pp. 877, 878.

²⁰ Ryle 1949, ch. 2.

That older and more natural way to pool opinions is through a vote, taking the decision of the majority (or in a many-option contest, of the plurality) to be veridical.²¹ In Joshua Cohen's early and influential description of this approach:

An epistemic interpretation of voting has three main elements:

- (1) an *independent standard* of correct decisions—that is, an account of justice or of the common good that is *independent* of current consensus and the outcome of votes:
- (2) a *cognitive* account of voting—that is, the view that voting expresses beliefs about what the correct policies are according to the independent standard, not personal preferences for policies; and
- (3) an account of *decision-making* as a process of the adjustment of beliefs, adjustments that are undertaken in part in light of the evidence about the correct answer that is provided by the beliefs of others.²²

In what follows we will have occasion (in Chapters 3 and 4 particularly) to amend Cohen's own account in almost every particular.²³ Still, that description provides a good first approximation to what is involved in the family of approaches that we shall be discussing.

1.4 THE CONDORCET JURY THEOREM, IN BRIEF

The history of philosophy contains many allusions to the 'wisdom of the multitude', starting with Aristotle's. ²⁴ But the most precise way of fleshing out that notion is one that goes back to the early days of modern probability theory—Condorcet's famous jury theorem ('CJT' for short). ²⁵ We describe the theorem more formally in Chapter 2, and extensions of it and objections to it in the three chapters following that.

Roughly and in brief, the CJT says two things. First, the majority vote among a group of (independent, competent, sincere) voters, each of whom is more likely to be right than not, is itself more likely to be right than are individual voters separately. Second, as the number of such voters approaches infinity, the probability that the majority among them is correct approaches one.

²² Cohen 1986, p. 34.

²⁴ Waldron 1995; 1999a, ch. 5. Arguably, however, Aristotle himself meant something other than what the epistemic interpretation of that phrase suggests (Schwartzberg 2016).

²⁵ Condorcet 1785; 1785/1976; 1785/1989; 1785/1994.

¹⁷ Lehdonvirta and Bright 2015. On his first day in office President Obama (2009) signed a memorandum dictating that 'Executive departments and agencies should offer Americans increased opportunities to...provide their Government with the benefits of their collective expertise and information'. On her experience as Chief Technical Officer in the White House administering that policy, see Noveck (2015). On the attempt to crowdsource a constitution for Iceland see Landemore (2015).

¹⁹ Of course, if error is not random then the trick does not work. We will say more about why error might not be random, in politics, in Section 4.5 and Chapter 5. Perhaps another ingredient contributing to the epistemic success of prediction markets, in particular, is the clever incentive structure combined with the power of crowdsourcing (Hanson 2013; Sunstein 2006b).

²¹ That, as distinct from sharing information with one another about the reasons lying behind their votes (Edelman 2002)—although we will discuss that too, in Chapter 9.

²³ Specifically, in Section 4.1.4 (and again in Chapters 13 and 14) we will deny Cohen's claim that Condorcet's jury theorem (the CJT) can only be used to track 'justice or... the common good' and cannot relate to 'personal preferences'. And throughout, we deny that the CJT necessarily involves any 'adjustment of beliefs' on the part of individuals (that would be a Bayesian framework, which, as Section 3.3.1 shows, is similar to but not the same as the CJT).

The process of aggregating votes is purely mechanical, to be sure. It elides other important elements of judgement, which surely matter in all sorts of ways (we will consider the role that deliberation and discussion have to play in Chapter 9). But if what we are seeking are true statements about the world, then soliciting the independent views of lots of informants on the propositions in question and simply totting up their responses can be a very good way of discovering those truths.²⁶

The mechanism by which the CJT works is once again quite simple. Over the course of many repetitions of some stochastic process, the relative frequency with which any given outcome occurs will approximate ever more closely the probability of its occurring ex ante.²⁷ Imagine an urn filled with a very large number of balls, 52 per cent of which are red and 48 per cent of which are black. In your first ten draws you might well get four reds and six blacks. But after a hundred draws²⁸ the proportions would become much nearer to the true percentages in the urn, and after a thousand draws they would become nearer yet again. By extension, if each voter votes independently of every other, and each is 52 per cent likely to vote for the correct outcome, then among hundreds (and still more thousands or millions) of such voters the correct outcome is very likely to garner something very close to 52 per cent of the votes. In any case, the correct outcome is very likely indeed to get above the 50 per cent + 1 threshold required to win—and it is increasingly likely to do so the more such independent voters there are.

A word about history.²⁹ Nicolas Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet, was himself a world historical figure. In the editorial introduction to the volume of his

²⁶ Perhaps Rousseau's horribly garbled discussion of why 'the general will never errs' in *The Social Contract* was referring to something like the CJT (Grofman and Feld 1988; cf. Philonenko 1984). In outlining the difference between the will of all and the general will, Rousseau (1762, bk. 2, ch. 3, para. 2) says:

the latter looks only to the common interest, the former looks to private interest, and is nothing but a sum of particular wills; but if, from these same wills, one takes away the pluses and the minuses which cancel each other out, what is left as the sum of the differences is the general will.

But what mathematical sense can that possibly make? How can the 'cancelling out' involved in the latter operation be any different from the addition (inevitably also involving pluses and minuses) in the former operation? How can the latter sum, which is supposed to be so distinct from the former, be any different at all? Perhaps what Rousseau was gesturing towards (as his subsequent discussion of the operation of factions in that same chapter suggests) was the workings of something like the jury theorem published by Condorcet twenty-three years later, and the way in which that theorem involves error (which is particular to each of the individuals and randomly distributed among them) cancelling, and leaving truth (which is common to all) as the remainder. But who would possibly have guessed that, from Rousseau's own garbled formulation?

²⁷ On one definition, probability just is that frequency. But in saying this we do not necessarily mean to endorse a frequentist definition of probability: what we say in the text will be the empirical consequence of probability defined in many other ways as well.

Assume that the balls are put back into the urn after each draw. Or, alternatively, assume that the number of balls in the urn is much greater than the total number of draws.

²⁹ For a good short account, see McLean and Hewitt (1994). For a more extended treatment see Williams (2004).

political writings in the Cambridge 'blue books' series, he is dubbed 'the last of the great French Enlightenment philosophes'—and, indeed, he was regarded as such 'in his [own] lifetime'. 30 A protégé of d'Alembert and Turgot and a favourite of Voltaire, Condorcet debated with Borda in the Académie Française and served as permanent secretary of the Académie des Sciences until it was suspended in the aftermath of the Revolution. He co-founded with Tom Paine the first Republican club in France. He presided over the Assemblée and its committee that drafted both a constitution for the new Republic and the 'Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen'. In the end he was denounced by Robespierre and hounded to death during the Terror. Franklin and Jefferson had been frequent participants in Condorcet's wife's famous salon during their time as American emissaries in Paris, and Condorcet commended his beloved daughter to the care of them and their families in his last testament written while in hiding.³¹ Jefferson included Condorcet's Essay on the Constitution and the Functions of Provincial Assemblies in a crate of books he sent to James Madison, just as the Madison was drafting the Virginia Plan for the American Constitution. And so on.

But our interest here is in Condorcet's work, not in the person or any direct influence of his on subsequent world events. That direct influence, it seems, was slight.³² There is no evidence that Madison even opened Condorcet's book as it passed through his hands (although he had clearly read Condorcet's *Letters from a Freeman of New Haven to a Citizen of Virginia*).³³ In short, Condorcet and his jury theorem were largely lost to history (certainly anyway to political theory), until it was resurrected in the middle years of the twentieth century.³⁴ Yet, as this book shall show, it is a powerful tool for building an epistemic theory of democracy.

1.5 EXTENDING THE CONDORCET JURY THEOREM

The Condorcet Jury Theorem and jury theorems related to it are the key analytic devices driving this book. Voting (or counting heads more generally) lies at their heart and will therefore always be a key part of the story.

Lukes and Urbinati 2012, p. xv. Urbinati 2006, p. 178.

31 Condorcet 1794/1994, p. 290.

32 Although it should be noted that his sketch on 'progress', written while in hiding, provided one of the principal foils for Malthus's 1798 Essay on the Principle of Population—the full title of which continues as it Affects the Future Improvement of Society, with Remarks on the Speculations of Mr. Godwin, M. Condorcet, and Other Writers (Malthus 1798/1992, p. vii).

³³ McLean and Urken 1992, pp. 453-5.

³⁴ In passing, and disapprovingly, by Black (1958, pp. 159–65); more enthusiastically and influentially by Barry (1964, 9–14; 1965, Appendix A, pp. 292–3). Within economics it lay dormant for even longer (Piketty 1999).

We will hardly confine ourselves to the analysis of voting mechanisms alone, however. On the basis of the CJT, we will construct a broad epistemic analysis of democratic government as a whole. Deliberation as well as voting will be part of that (in Chapter 9). So too will be agenda setting and civic education (in Chapters 8 and 6). The role of leadership, of tradition, of factions, and parties will all be analysed in these terms (respectively, in Chapters 11, 10, 14, and 17). The structure of government, and the way key players ought to approach their roles within it, will also be subject to that scrutiny (in Chapter 16).

We will be building on the foundation provided by the Condorcet Jury Theorem, not simply applying it. Much of the work of the book lies in elaborating extensions and variations on the basic CJT. There, what we will be doing is developing and applying an umbrella framework that sustains several related jury theorems.

Those extensions and elaborations on the basic CJT are designed, in the first instance, to help overcome some of the familiar objections to the applicability of the CJT to political life in the real world (we say more about those shortly). But we offer those extensions and elaborations of the CJT not so much defensively as positively—as a way of helping to extend the applicability of the CJT to political life in the real world in certain genuinely important respects.

For example, casual observers might imagine that the CJT requires more competence among voters than it really does (as we show in Section 3.1.1). They might wrongly assume that it applies only to binary choice situations, when actually it can be extended to apply to many-option cases (Section 3.2). They might wrongly assume that it requires voters to be totally independent of one another, whereas it actually presupposes interdependence among them in one crucial respect (Section 5.1) and it can, without any change in the substantive results whatsoever, tolerate at least a limited amount of interdependence among them in other respects (Section 4.5.3).

Perhaps the most important extension of the CJT grows out of our discussion of independence in Sections 5.3 and 5.4. There, we set out a related jury theorem according to which the epistemic success of any group is limited by the truth-conduciveness of the decision situation before it (the veracity of available evidence, for example). The truth-conduciveness of the decision situation fixes the best that even the 'best responder' to that situation can do in the epistemic circumstances at hand.

1.6 FORESTALLING FAMILIAR OBJECTIONS

Now let us briefly foreshadow three of the most common objections to the applicability of the Condorcet Jury Theorem, and sketch how we will deal with them in the chapters to come.

1.6.1 Competence

The Condorcet Jury Theorem crucially presupposes that individual voters are minimally competent, which is to say, 'better than random'. As long as that is true of individual voters (and they vote sincerely and independently of one another), the CJT tells us that the majority among a large electorate is very highly likely to be right. If individual voters are worse than random, however, then the CJT offers an equally firm warning that the majority among a large number of such voters is very highly likely to be wrong.

So which is more likely? A long line of commentators, starting with Plato and including Condorcet himself, fear that the ignorance of the general public would drive mass democracy in the latter direction.³⁵ Their fears have been stoked by the findings of contemporary social research that people in general are woefully ignorant of basic political facts, when quizzed about them.³⁶ Those findings are warmly embraced by activists who are looking for an excuse to wind back the state.³⁷ And in light of those findings, sober social theorists hesitate to put all of their epistemological eggs in the CJT basket.³⁸

In the chapters that follow, we will argue that voter ignorance is not as deep as people's responses to those quiz-style survey questions might suggest. Voters can employ 'cues' and informational shortcuts to help them vote in the right way from their own perspective (the way they would have voted if they had been fully informed) without having the sort of detailed factual knowledge being tested in those quizzes (Chapters 6, 12). People can inform themselves through deliberations and discussions (Chapter 9), and by taking the advice of more knowledgeable acquaintances (Section 11.4). They can pool knowledge with others whose judgements they trust should be similar to their own (Sections 14.2 and 14.3). And, as John Stuart Mill never tired of emphasizing, politically empowering people leads to their becoming more politically informed as well (Section 15.6).³⁹ In all of those ways, voters can and arguably do get more task-specific knowledge that is likely to make them competent enough for CJT purposes.

Remember, too: 'competent enough for CJT purposes' means merely 'better than random'. If people have absolutely no information or inclinations whatsoever, their votes will be random. It is easy to see how people, on average, might be a bit better than random—and that is all the CJT requires (Section 3.1.1). Maybe they are interested in the matter, or maybe they incidentally acquired information bearing on the matter in the course of their other activities, for example. It is hard to see how people, in general, would be worse than random.

³⁵ Condorcet 1785/1976, pp. 49–50.

³⁶ See Section 6.1.1 for a discussion of those findings.

³⁷ Hayek 1960, p. 110; Caplan 2007; J. Brennan 2011b; 2014; 2016.

Of course, any given individual might be wrong on any given occasion; indeed, among a large group of people, some people might even be wrong on virtually all occasions. But how can a large number of individuals be systematically worse than random, except by all of them being subject to the same set of external influences that lead them all to err in the same direction at one and the same time?

1.6.2 Independence

That points to the second standard critique of the Condorcet Jury Theorem. It assumes that people's votes are independent of one another's. Historical debates are replete with arguments for limiting the franchise to those of 'independent will', and various classes of people have historically been denied the vote because they were thought to fail that test (among them slaves, servants, apprentices, wives, bankrupts, and the propertyless).⁴⁰

Often those older arguments were couched in terms of 'virtue'. But in terms of the CJT it is purely a matter of epistemic prudence. Given a large number of minimally competent voters each of whom is sincere and independent of one another, the CJT assures us that the majority is very likely to be correct. But if everyone votes the way the boss tells them to vote, then the probability that the majority vote among them is correct is no higher than the probability that the boss is correct, however many votes have been cast.

We no longer have slaves nor very many servants, and we now regard wives and people without property as more independent than we used to do. But there are many other ways in which the independence of voters might be compromised. People read the same newspapers (or nowadays blogs), listen to the same speeches, they share many of the same experiences, they talk to one another. There is no way that their votes are statistically independent of one another's.

But that is simply the wrong standard, for jury theorem purposes, as we explain at length in Chapter 5. For a start, the votes of competent voters track objectively true facts about the state of the world (that is just what it means to be 'competent' in the CJT). There will inevitably be a statistical correlation among their votes, for that reason. Furthermore, voters do not have direct, unmediated access to the true state of the world. They only have evidence about it. For that reason, too, there will be correlation among the votes of competent people voting on the basis of the best evidence that is available to them all. The best the majority of even a very large number of highly competent voters can

then do is, naturally, limited by the quality of the best evidence available to them; and the probability that such a majority is right is effectively upper-bounded by the probability that that evidence is informative. (That is the 'Best Responder' corollary introduced in Section 5.3.) This result is useful on two accounts: it leads to a more realistic assumption about independence, and also to a more realistic jury theorem, sensitive to the quality of the evidence.

There are other epistemically less fortuitous ways in which people's votes might fail to be independent of one another's. Voters might blindly follow the same opinion leader, or they might harbour the same prejudices, or they might just share the same psychology and be subject to the same heuristics and biases. ⁴¹ Those ways would all compromise the epistemic performance of even a very large group of voters—but not necessarily fatally so. Variants of the CJT still work, albeit a little more slowly, even with interdependence among votes of that sort, just so long as these misleading factors are not too strong (Section 4.5.3). They still work if the effects of the various sources of interdependence cancel one another out (Section 11.2.2)—or even if there are just many independent and minimally informative common influences at work (Sections 11.3, 12.4, 12.5). And restricted versions of the CJT still work even if none of that is true (Section 5.4).

1.6.3 The Truth Value of Values

Perhaps the most fundamental objection to the application of the Condorcet Jury Theorem to politics is that it pertains only to matters of fact, whereas politics crucially involves value judgements. Value judgements cannot be true or false, correct or incorrect, in the same way that factual judgements can be. Hence, the CJT simply does not apply to them—or to politics more generally, insofar as politics is shot through with value judgements. Or so the objection goes. 42

There are various ways in which value judgements might have truth values, which we will sketch shortly. But first it is worth emphasizing that our principal focus in this book is *not* on those. It is instead on common or garden truths of the sorts we bump into in science and when negotiating our way in the world. Our discussion of senses in which moral claims might be 'true' is meant merely to show that those may be true *too*, albeit perhaps in rather different

⁴⁰ Kouser 1984. For arguments to that effect see: the exchanges between Ireton, Cromwell, and Petty at the Putney Debates (Woodhouse 1938, pp. 82–3); Blackstone 1783, bk. 1, ch. 2, sec. 5; Jefferson 1785/1964, query 19.

⁴¹ Estlund (1993, p. 99, n. 44; 2008, p. 16) echoes earlier worries on this score (Condorcet 1785/1976, pp. 49, 62; Mill 1872/1974, bk. 3, ch. 18, sec. 3, p. 539). See similarly: Waldron 1989, p. 1323; Sunstein 2006c, pp. 34–6.

⁴² Black 1958, p. 163; Miller 1992, p. 56; Copp 1993; Estlund 1993. Some would say that 'prudence', and 'judgement' as the virtue involved in tracking it, is different in kind yet again (Beiner 1983); but here we simply take that to be a mixture of those two other kinds, facts and values.

ways than those other truths are true. To reiterate, however: those 'moral truths' are certainly not the only, or even the principal, ones we will be discussing in this book.

The objection in view confidently asserts that value judgements have no truth value. But that assertion itself may be simply incorrect. We discuss various ways that might be so in Section 4.1. For a start, there is disagreement among metaethicists on precisely this question. Various strands of cognitivists, especially moral realists, would insist that moral claims can indeed be true or false. And even those who say that morality is 'invented' (or more politely, 'socially constructed') would have to agree that there is surely some fact of the matter about 'what the conventions around here are'.

In short, our response to this objection will be the same as that of two prominent earlier epistemic democrats, with whom we disagree in many other respects. Estlund and Landemore write:

By 'correct or right decision' here, or 'the truth', can be meant an array of things, from objective truth of the matter (about facts or morality) to a more intersubjective, culturally-dependent, and temporary construct (about more socially constructed facts or moral questions). What epistemic democrats emphasize...is merely the Habermasian (and commonsensical enough) point that we wouldn't be exchanging reasons in the first place if we did not believe that there was something to figure out, whether we call this something the truth, the right, or the correct, just or socially useful answer.⁴³

1.7 THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

This book is divided into four nearly equal parts.

In Part I we first introduce the Condorcet Jury Theorem more fully and more formally (always striving, nonetheless, to keep the discussion easily accessible). We then go on to discuss some extensions of the classic CJT, to discuss its limits (which we argue are less limiting than often supposed), and to discuss in more detail the crucial Independence Assumption that is often seen as the Achilles' heel of the CJT.

In Part II we discuss various ways in which epistemic performance might be enhanced. One is at the individual level, improving the individual competence of voters. Others operate at a more systemic level. Those include: introducing more diversity among the decision-making group; introducing a division of epistemic labour within it; and encouraging discussion and deliberation across it. Many of the contributions of discussion and deliberation operate outside the strict framework of the CJT, but are clearly related to it: improving the decision

⁴³ Estlund and Landemore 2018.

situation, expanding the evidence base, expanding the agenda for decision, and such like.

Part III examines the epistemic effects of various familiar practices through the lens of the CJT. Both respecting tradition and following leaders can often carry considerable epistemic costs, although we show that there are ways in which those costs can be largely avoided even with those practices. Taking cues can be a good epistemic strategy for voters who are not themselves competent and is an epistemically tolerable strategy even for those who are. We conclude this part of the book with a discussion of how differing values and priorities within the community might be accommodated within a CJT-like framework. A version of the CJT goes through, even under circumstances of pluralism, regarding values and priorities. And an epistemic form of factionalism can help the epistemically disadvantaged avoid having their distinctive interests electorally disadvantaged.

Part IV uses the CJT logic to assess various structures of government, from an epistemic point of view. There we show that epistemic considerations do not unequivocally favour an epistocracy rather than a democracy, and that in fact there are important epistemic considerations weighing in favour of a broad franchise. We go on to show reasons for thinking that, counter-intuitively, representative democracy might actually be epistemically preferable to direct democracy and that it is epistemically no problem for many of those representatives to act as trustees, as long as just a few of them see themselves as delegates bound by the instructions of their constituents. We go on to show how some institutional designs can impose epistemic bottlenecks that hinder collective competence, while other institutional design features can serve to increase it.

Part V summarizes the results and revisits the larger philosophical issues surrounding democracy and truth-tracking. We ask whether there are truths in politics, what they might look like, and whether it is possible to identify them by asking many voters. Some have suggested that going after 'The Truth' is counter-productive, perhaps even dangerous. While there are some situations in which democratically searching for The Truth is unhelpful, legitimate government requires that decisions be epistemically meritorious in general. Finally, in the Epilogue, we assess the implications of the 2016 US presidential elections and the 'Brexit' vote in the UK for epistemic theories of democracy—and indeed for democratic theory in general.

As will be seen from Table A2.1, in many cases our results rely on Monte Carlo simulation rather than analytic results. We resort to Monte Carlo simulations, where we do, because an analytical solution is too complicated or computationally too demanding.

The idea of a Monte Carlo simulation is simple: to use a large number of (pseudo-) random samples to estimate relevant properties of the process under consideration. In this book we are typically interested in the probability of the correct alternative winning a majority of votes. We know how individual votes come about, from what we know (or in this book, typically stipulate) about how competent the voters are, whether and how much they are influenced by other factors, etc. What we are trying to estimate is, given those facts, how often the majority of voters will be correct.

To estimate that probability, we simulate a great many (typically 10,000 or more) rounds of voting. That entails using a computer program to simulate in each round the vote of each voter, making use of a random number generator set to reflect the various probabilities stipulated for the case under investigation. After each round we record whether the majority was correct, incorrect, or whether the vote was tied. After a large number of rounds of such simulations, we then calculate the proportion of rounds in which the correct alternative has won a majority of votes. This proportion is our estimate of the probability of a majority voting for the correct alternative, under the circumstances specified for that suite of simulations.⁵

In effect, our Monte Carlo simulations approximate the observation of a great many actual elections. But a computational simulation has two major advantages: we can calculate the results of many thousands simulated elections within a few seconds; and we can set precisely the parameters we want to investigate.

Monte Carlo estimates are highly reliable if they are based on a very large number of rounds. For the purposes of this book, in which qualitative numerical relations are more important than numerical precision to many digits, 10,000 (or sometimes even just 1,000) rounds will typically suffice.

⁴ See Mooney (1997) for an approachable introduction.

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⁵ We typically also assume that ties are broken with a coin toss and adjust the ratio of 'correct' results accordingly.

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