

Rational Ignorance and the Instrumentalist Case for Epistocracy

Aryan Budden

Gems New Millennium School

Abstract

Political power is one of the few forms of consequential authority granted without any test of competence, an asymmetry democracy leaves largely unexamined. This paper argues that this asymmetry cannot be sustained once the mechanics of rational ignorance are taken seriously. Drawing on Anthony Downs' *theory of rational ignorance* (1957), the paper establishes that voter ignorance in democracies is not a correctable issue but a structural consequence of the incentive structure of democracy. Building on Jason Brennan's *instrumentalist critique of democracy* (2016), it argues that political legitimacy should be judged primarily by the outcomes a system produces rather than by the fairness of its procedure alone. This position is defended directly against David Estlund's hybrid epistemic proceduralism. On this basis, the paper defends John Stuart Mill's model of plural voting (1861) as the institutional response that satisfies two requirements generated by this argument:

- (i) Correcting for the outcomes-based failure rational ignorance produces
- (ii) Preserving the procedural inclusion that retains independent weight even under an instrumentalist standard

The paper distinguishes plural voting from more exclusionary epistocratic alternatives, including restricted suffrage and an epistocratic veto council, before addressing the four most serious objections to this position, including a direct engagement with the "Condorcet Jury Theorem" and its defense of unweighted democracy.

Keywords: epistocracy, rational ignorance, plural voting, political legitimacy, instrumentalism, John Stuart Mill, Jason Brennan, David Estlund.

Introduction

Consequential authority in modern society is often granted with a test of competence. For a surgeon to acquire the authority to operate, their test lies in years of training. Similarly, in order to drive a vehicle, one must pass an examination, only then are they trusted with a vehicle capable of killing. In both cases, society accepts that the potential harm of such instruments, whether it be surgical tools or a car, can be trusted with individuals who pass a threshold that proves their capabilities before the power itself is granted. Political power is one such form of consequential authority that is granted, but without any test of competence. In today's world, voting has become a conspicuous exception. The right to help select the next term of a body that has the power to tax, imprison, legislate, let alone wage war, requires no threshold to prove one's capability to use power. This shows a fundamental asymmetry in how modern society sees and distributes power, and additionally shows us what democratic theory has left largely unexamined.

"Public knowledge levels fall well short of the requirements of normative theories of political

participation," writes Ilya Somin (*Democracy and Political Ignorance*, 2013, p. 60). Her writings, along with philosophical writers spanning from Mill to contemporaries like Jason Brennan, raise a question that is easy to overlook precisely because of how the masses show positive feelings towards universal suffrage: Is the exception of such consequential authority of political power actually justified? Research into voter behavior has consistently found that the average voter has little to no knowledge of basic political facts, consequences of policies, or the political ideologies of the candidates they support. This pattern was documented by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996), whose analysis of nearly 50 years of data made it clear that while citizens are not completely incompetent in the context of politics, a substantial portion remain poorly informed, with knowledge levels being unchanged for five decades since this analysis took place. The assumption underlying universal suffrage, that political power, unlike power in every other consequential domain, requires no demonstrated competence, does not survive scrutiny once the mechanics of rational ignorance are taken seriously. In 1957, Downs formulated the definitive model of rational ignorance. His model of rational ignorance suggests that the cost of political knowledge exceeds its beneficial payoffs for any individual voter, given that a single vote mathematically can't determine an outcome. Additionally, on his account, political legitimacy for any form of government is best evaluated by its outcomes produced rather than the fairness of universal suffrage. This idea complements the instrumentalist model of plural voting introduced by John Stuart Mill. This paper aims to explain that because rational ignorance makes universal suffrage structurally unlikely to produce competent political outcomes, and because political legitimacy should be judged by the outcomes a system produces rather than by the fairness of its procedure alone, Mill's model of plural voting offers the most defensible correction to democracy's central flaw.

The paper proceeds into four stages as follows:

Section 1 establishes the empirical and theoretical basis of rational ignorance, drawing on Downs and Brennan to show that voter incompetence is a predictable structural outcome rather than a correctable defect.

Section 2 examines the philosophical fault line between proceduralism and instrumentalism as competing grounds for political legitimacy, showing that legitimacy grounded in fairness of procedure alone cannot adequately answer the problem rational ignorance poses.

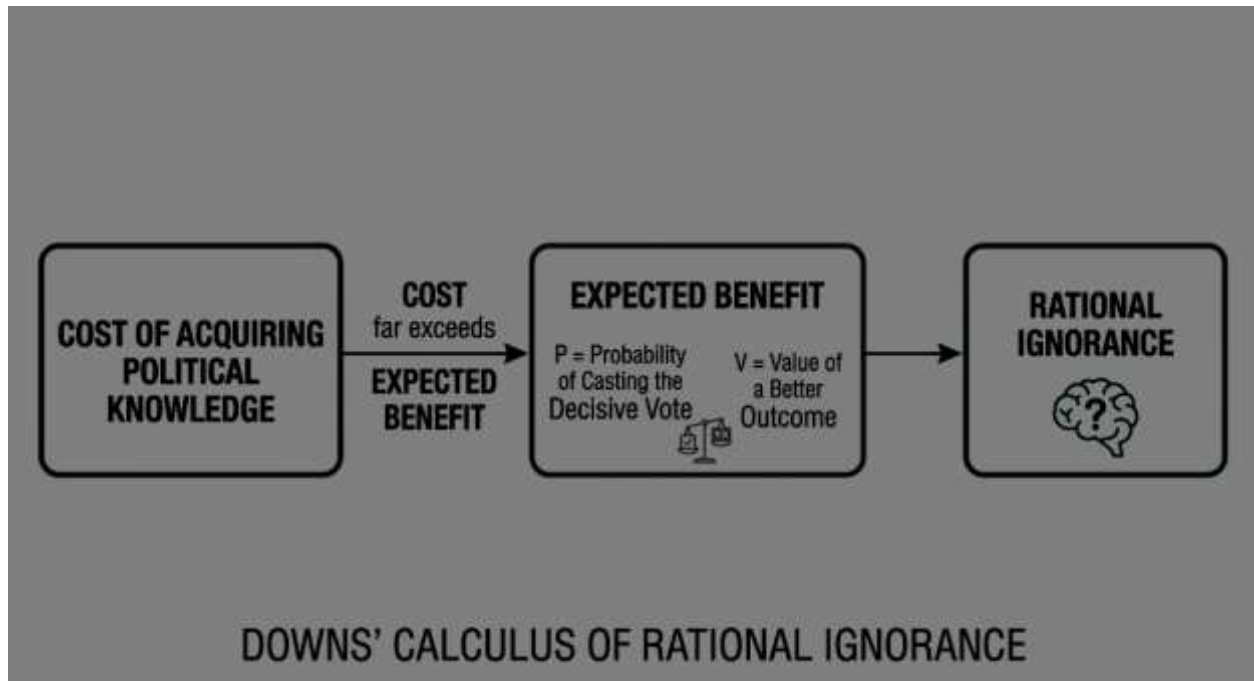
Section 3 defends plural voting specifically, distinguishing it from more radical epistocratic alternatives such as restricted suffrage, and identifies it as the strongest available instrumentalist case.

Section 4 addresses the four most serious objections to this position — the difficulty of fairly defining political competence, the historical misuse of competence-based qualifications to disenfranchise marginalized groups, the proceduralist objection that fairness holds value independent of outcomes, and the aggregation objection drawn from the "Condorcet Jury Theorem" before concluding that plural voting withstands these challenges more successfully than either unmodified democracy or its harsher epistocratic rivals.

Section 1: The Basis of Rational Ignorance

Anthony Downs' *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957) presents us with the idea of why voter ignorance exists in democracies. His model follows a simple logic of cost-benefit calculation where it calculates the weight of acquiring political knowledge with respect to time and effort. He concludes that the expected benefit of political knowledge falls short of its cost, as the probability of a well-informed voter determining an electoral outcome is close to zero. On his account, ignorance isn't a failure of

individual reasoning but the outcome of reasoning correctly. Hence the idea of rational ignorance was coined in 1957. A rational individual, presented with a cost that exceeds its benefits, chooses not to pay it. This observation remained central to political science for over half a century, and it reframes voter ignorance as a predictable structural aspect of democracy rather than the lack of effort by individual voters. The relationship is illustrated below:



This prediction is not merely theoretical. Delli Carpini and Keeter's analysis (1996) confirms that public knowledge of politics has remained static over the period of their research (five decades). This has continued into Ilya Somin's more recent analysis of this evidence, which concludes that *public knowledge levels fall well short of the requirements of normative theories of political participation* (2013, p. 60). The truth that this pattern persists, despite decades of innovation and human advancement, is evidence against treating voter ignorance as a correctable defect. If critics argue that ignorance was simply a matter of insufficient access to political education, the last fifty years of media expansion and internet access to political information should have shown measurable improvement. It has not.

This raises a political question: could civic education initiatives close the gap that access to information alone has not? Downs' model suggests that it cannot. He argues that the barrier to political knowledge isn't lack of access to information but is incentive-based. He suggests that as long as the cost-benefit logic shows ignorance is the rational path to take, the expected payoff of political knowledge remains low regardless of how cheaply or effectively that knowledge can be made available. To debunk the idea, civic education can lower the cost of acquiring political knowledge, but it cannot alter the underlying calculation that makes ignorance the rational choice. This single-handedly distinguishes rational ignorance from the idea of information defect, showing us that it is an incentive problem, and not an access problem. Downs continues to write that incentive problems aren't solved by supplying more of what voters never needed, but by altering the motivation to seek the information.

Jason Brennan's *Against Democracy* (2016) takes Downs' model into a normative claim. His central premise is that voting isn't merely an expressive act, but an act of power over others. He writes that a vote

not only reflects a voter's preference, but helps determine the laws, taxes, and policies imposed on all citizens in that state. On that basis, Brennan argues that voting is only *permissible* if exercised competently (Brennan, 2016, p. 21). If rational ignorance is, as Downs suggests, a structural and predictable feature of democracy, then competent exercise of power cannot be assumed by the condition of universal suffrage. It must be treated as an open question for debate, one that democracy has no mechanism to answer. Taking both books together, it establishes two claims this paper builds on directly. First, rational ignorance is not something that can be corrected by modern democratic systems, but a consequence of the structure with respect to elections. And secondly, because voting constitutes power over others rather than a purely self-serving choice, this predictable ignorance is not a neutral empirical fact, but a problem for the legitimacy of the democratic systems it relies on. Hence the question that follows, and the one Section 2 takes up directly, is what are the standards of legitimacy a political system must meet, and whether democracy's incompetent decision-making can meet them.

Section 2: Proceduralism vs. Instrumentalism

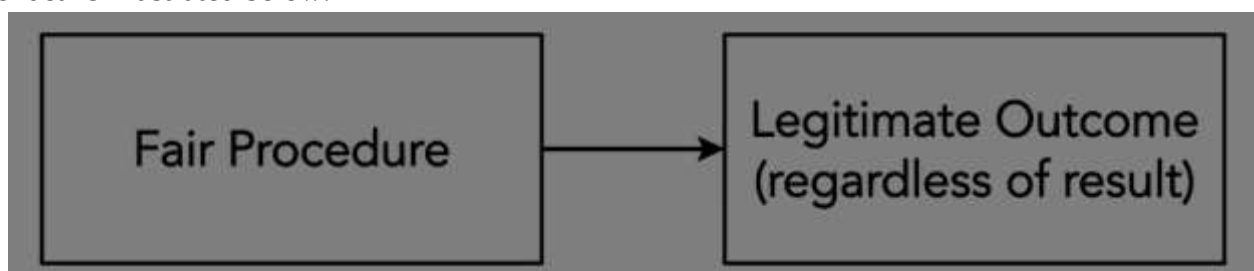
Section 1 established that rational ignorance is a non-correctable feature of democracy. And whether this establishment poses a problem for democratic legitimacy depends entirely on what legitimacy is taken to consist of in the first place. Political philosophy offers us two competing answers to this question: Proceduralism vs. Instrumentalism. We will look into the middle ground of these ideologies as well.

The Proceduralist Position

The main idea of proceduralism is that a political system's legitimacy comes from the fairness by which decisions are made, independent of the quality of the outcome. By this ideology, a decision reached through fair and equal procedure is legitimate even if the outcome is perceived to be suboptimal. As the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy summarizes, proceduralists hold this position because there is no shared standard by which the quality of a political outcome could be judged in society. Reasonable people often disagree with what counts as a good outcome. Hence a fair solution for resolving that disagreement is the proceduralist standard that does not simply presuppose one side of the disagreement is correct.

John Rawls's case offers the clearest illustration of why this ideology has philosophical grounding. Rawls illustrates this using a fair betting game where he suggests that if a number of people engage in a series of fair bets, the resulting distribution of money after the final bet is fair, regardless of what that distribution turns out to be (Rawls, 1971, p. 86). To put this idea into a nutshell, the fairness of the outcome is entirely reliant on the fairness of the procedure that produced it. And Rawls writes further, suggesting there is no independent standard the outcome must also satisfy. Now if we apply this ideology in the context of voting, the ideology gives us a direct claim: if one vote per individual is fair, then whatever government results from it inherits that fairness.

The idea is illustrated below:



The Instrumentalist Position

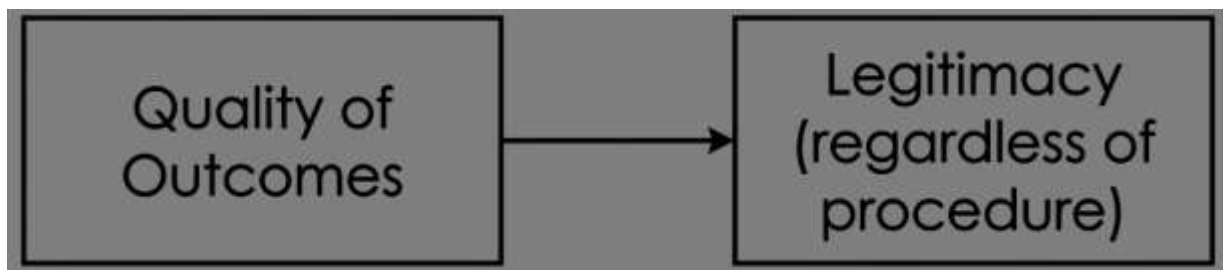
Instrumentalism rejects the idea that procedure alone can bear the weight of legitimacy. Looking through

instrumentalist lenses, democratic procedures are, at most, a means to an end. Therefore, legitimacy depends on whether that end quality of outcome is reliably achieved (Christiano, 2004). Thomas Christiano suggests that instrumentalism is a monistic concept of legitimacy as it reduces legitimacy to the quality of the outcomes a political system generates and treats procedural fairness as valuable under the condition that it reliably serves the end result.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to specify what this paper means by a good outcome. This paper does not claim to resolve the deep disagreement of political values that proceduralists point to. Instead, it adopts a minimal uncontroversial standard that suggests a political outcome is good, for the purposes of this argument, to the extent that it protects citizens' basic rights, avoids fiscally or socially catastrophic policy, and is responsive to the empirical consequences of the decisions it produces. This standard does not require agreement on contested questions of distributive justice or the proper size of government, it requires only that a political system's decisions have available evidence about their own effects. Rational ignorance established in Section 1 threatens this minimal standard, since a voter who is unaware of a policy's basic empirical consequences cannot be responsive to them.

Jason Brennan's argument, which was shown in Section 1, is a type of instrumentalism applied to political competence. Referencing the analogy used in the introduction, a surgeon's authority to operate is not grounded in a fair procedure for selecting surgeons, but in surgeons reliably producing good outcomes. If the procedure for surgeons were perfectly fair but reliably produced incompetent surgeons, the fairness of the procedure would not rescue its legitimacy. Likewise, when extended to politics, the same logic applies. If universal suffrage is a fair procedure that reliably produces incompetent political decisions, due to rational ignorance established in Section 1, its fairness does not rescue its legitimacy either.

The idea is illustrated below:



The Middle Position

Between these extreme positions sits a third option. David Estlund's epistemic proceduralism sits with ideas from both proceduralism and instrumentalism. It suggests that a decision is legitimate when it results from a procedure that is both fair and tends to produce good outcomes (Estlund, 1997; Estlund, 2008).

Estlund's framework is worth engaging with because it represents the strongest challenge instrumentalism must answer. His more hybrid standard suggests that a procedure retains legitimacy only if it has some meaningful tendency toward good outcomes. But even so, this leaves an opening for this paper's thesis, as Section 1 shows that rational ignorance is not an occasional or random occurrence but a structural and predictable feature of democracy. Hence, this raises the question of whether unmodified universal suffrage can meet even this more moderate, hybrid standard.

Why Instrumentalism Is the Correct Standard

Estlund's hybrid position is the strongest available challenge to pure instrumentalism as it grants

procedural fairness some independent weight, rather than none at all. But even under Estlund's moderate threshold for consequential authority, the practical verdict does not change. This is because his own standard requires that a legitimate procedure has some meaningful tendency toward good outcomes. This requires that the procedure's error rate fall below some non-trivial threshold rather than merely exceed zero. Section 1's evidence that voter knowledge levels have remained static across five decades despite falling information costs does not merely suggest occasional error, it suggests a persistently non-decreasing error rate with no self-correcting mechanism internal to the procedure itself. A procedure with a stable and structural error rate of this kind is precisely the case Estlund's own hybrid standard was designed to exclude, since a 'meaningful tendency' toward good outcomes cannot be satisfied by a tendency that has shown no capacity to improve over half a century of rising information access.

Section 1 shows us that universal suffrage would fail to meet even this modest requirement, as rational ignorance is a structural and predictable feature of democracy. Even Estlund's model cannot certify universal suffrage as reliably tending towards good outcomes. This is exactly why a fully instrumentalist standard is a more consistent and defensible position to adopt, as it asks directly what outcomes a system produces rather than trying to preserve some independent weight for fairness. This paper therefore proceeds on instrumentalist grounds.

Having established this, a further question follows: what specific institutional mechanism could correct for this failure? Section 3 takes up this question directly, defending John Stuart Mill's model of plural voting as the strongest available instrumentalist correction.

Section 3: Mill's Model of Plural Voting

Sections 1 and 2 together create two requirements that any alternative or solution to democracy's flaw must meet. Firstly, a solution must have an answer for rational ignorance and its ability to structurally weaken political outcomes. And secondly, a solution must still preserve procedural inclusion, since fairness of process still carries real weight even under an outcome-based standard. A correction must satisfy both needs simultaneously, not one at the cost of the other.

Under universal suffrage, every citizen holds exactly one vote. This can be considered a unit of influence. But since in a democracy everybody's unit is equal, we cannot reflect on how competently that influence is likely to be exercised. This problem, along with several other problems mentioned in Sections 1 and 2, can be solved by John Stuart Mill's model of plural voting, where political influence is distributed whilst everyone universally has the right to one unit of influence. Every citizen retains a guaranteed baseline vote, and additional votes can be layered on top of that baseline according to a specific threshold. Mill suggests these qualifications should be the ability to read and write, competence in basic arithmetic, and status as a direct taxpayer (Mill, 1861).

Furthermore, the philosophical core of this model addresses what it does and what it does not do. It doesn't ask "Is the citizen permitted to vote?", it asks "How much weight can be added to this individual's vote?" And this distinction is what allows the model to function as a genuine correction to rational ignorance rather than a cosmetic one. Section 1 established that the cost-benefit ratio of political knowledge is too low for a voter to justify the cost of acquiring it. Plural voting addresses this problem by altering what a citizen's political engagement is actually worth.

At the same time, the model's structure is what allows it to satisfy Section 2's requirement without the cost of the first one. This is because additional votes are layered over the universal baseline. The model doesn't have to answer and distinguish right to vote by "who is competent to vote?", rather it rewards

competent voters with additional votes and everybody else retains their baseline vote. By satisfying both requirements simultaneously by one mechanism, the idea of maximising outcomes with respect to universal suffrage becomes one goal instead of two competing ones.

This position also finds support through the contemporary thinker, Jason Brennan. His argument for outcome-based legitimacy, which laid the groundwork for Sections 1 and 2, treats plural voting as one of the viable epistocratic models available to correct democracy's competence problem (Brennan, 2016). This joint thought matters for the strength of this paper's argument as well because the case for plural voting is not a revival of a nineteenth-century proposal, but a position that a leading contemporary defender of instrumentalist legitimacy independently arrives at as well.

To contrast, let's look into the most commonly proposed alternatives to plural voting. Firstly, the idea of restricted suffrage, which removes voting rights entirely from those judged not to meet a competence threshold. It meets the first requirement of weighting political power toward demonstrated competence, but does so at the cost of the second requirement, as it goes against procedural inclusion. Secondly, an epistocratic council satisfies the second requirement, since no one's vote is touched, but only weakly addresses the first. This is because a council checks legislation for competence after it's already been decided, rather than improving the competence of the decision itself at the point where votes are cast. Neither alternative solves both requirements through one mechanism the way plural voting does.

However, this does not mean Mill's model is beyond challenge. Section 4 takes up the strongest objections to this position directly, which include the difficulty of defining competence criteria fairly, the historical record of similar qualifications being used to disenfranchise marginalized groups, the argument that fairness retains value independent of the outcomes a system produces, and the objection that even individually ill-informed voters can produce reliable outcomes in aggregate. Addressing these objections is the entire objective of Section 4.

Section 4: Objections and Replies

Section 3 argued that plural voting satisfies the requirements acquired from Sections 1 and 2 and that it is a far better solution than restricted suffrage or an epistocratic council. However, this model isn't completely defensible. It must also survive real-world objections. Hence, this section addresses the four most serious challenges to plural voting directly.

The Competence Definition Problem

The first objection is concerned with the very definition of competence. Critics argue that identifying who is genuinely incompetent is difficult because the knowledge relevant to political power is distributed broadly across society. They argue that a skilled trader may understand local economic conditions more precisely than a college graduate and hence conclude that if competence is defined too narrowly around formal education, the criteria risk measuring social advantage rather than political judgment.

Mill's criteria offer a partial solution to this objection. He argues that literacy, numeracy and direct taxation status are independent facts about a person, rather than a judgement system made by an official about a citizen's abstract "competence". This separates Mill's model from a system that would require personally assessing every citizen's political judgement. However, it does not fully answer the particular criteria of why formal education should be treated as more relevant to political judgment than the experience-based knowledge critics point to. This paper does not claim Mill's criteria are beyond debate, it simply claims that the criteria-based structure of plural voting is sound, and that the criteria themselves remain a subject

for further debate.

The Historical Misuse Objection

History shows us that competence based voting systems have already been tried and tested. And it happens to be one of the darkest chapters of history. After the ratification of the fifteenth amendment in 1870, southern legislatures in the United States enacted literacy tests explicitly designed to disenfranchise black voters while avoiding any language that named race directly. These tests were unfair, as white evaluators often accepted any answers from white applicants while using the epistocratic structure to fail black applicants. In some cases, such as the Louisiana test of the 1960s, the test itself was written to be impossible to pass by using vague instructions rather than a genuine search for competent voters. Furthermore, to ensure the tests did not go against white voters, many states adopted the “grandfather clause”, which granted anyone whose grandfather had been eligible to vote to be eligible as well. The date by design excluded nearly every black citizen, as the vast majority of blacks in that era were enslaved and excluded from voting rights. This harsh reality, in the name of “competence”, functioned as a tool for racial exclusion. This remained in place for quite some time before being abolished by the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Therefore, history itself gives us a third requirement, which asks that any model of epistocracy in light of competence-based voting must reckon with historical problems rather than treating it as a separate issue. Therefore, we must look into the structural distinction between historical cases and what plural voting is designed to do. The tests in the historical case were mechanisms of exclusion, which meant failing the test meant losing the vote entirely. Then it was further tied to the grandfather clause that conducted racial exclusion rather than distinguishing competent voters from incompetent ones. Plural voting, in contrast, is a weighted mechanism where the baseline vote remains universal. Under Mill’s model,¹ there is no requirement for adults to cast their baseline vote. This difference of degree separates Mill’s model from historical tests, as it has no equivalence under a model where the vote itself can never be taken away.

But it is worth acknowledging that this distinction does not eliminate the objection completely. The logic in those discriminative tests can be put into a modern point of view where a poorly designed weighting system could still, in theory, be structured so that certain groups systematically qualify for additional votes while others don’t. This is a reason for transparent criteria to be adopted and explained before being applied. The lesson of the historical case is not that competence-based qualifications are inherently corrupt, but that any such system must be designed with active safeguards against exactly the kind of discriminatory administration that defined its historical father.

The Proceduralist Objection

The third objection returns to the fault line established in Section 2. A committed proceduralist can accept everything argued so far: that plural voting corrects for rational ignorance, that its criteria are more defensible than those of restricted suffrage, that it avoids the gravest harms of historical racism, and still object that unequal voting weight is itself a violation of something. In Rawls’s writings of pure proceduralism, fairness is meant to be a property of procedure itself. Weighting one citizen’s vote above another’s, in his view, is unfair and cannot be accepted under pure proceduralism.

This paper’s reply follows directly from the position defended in Section 2, where it states that procedural fairness carries independent weight, but it is not the sole ground of legitimacy, and it can be outweighed when a procedure structurally and predictably fails to produce competent outcomes. Mill’s model,

however, looks at this problem and meets it at its middle ground, where plural voting layers additional votes on top of a universal baseline rather than replacing it. And people who still argue that any deviation from strict equality is impermissible, regardless of the outcomes, are applying a standard this paper has already argued against through Estlund's objection to pure proceduralism in Section 2.

The Aggregation Objection

The Condorcet Jury Theorem states that when a large number of individually error-prone voters make independent judgments on a choice, each voter is more likely than not to be correct as the probability that the majority verdict is correct approaches certainty as the number of voters grows, even though no individual voter is reliable. Critics of epistocracy use this result to argue that Section 1's diagnosis is incomplete, as rational ignorance describes individual voters accurately, but it does not follow that aggregate outcomes are poor, because the errors of millions of independently reasoning voters can cancel each other out.

This objection is serious, but it rests on a condition the empirical record in Section 1 undermines, which is independence itself. The Condorcet result holds only when voter errors are uncorrelated. Downs' cost-benefit account and the decades of stable, low-information voting patterns documented by Delli Carpini and Keeter point toward a different mechanism, which says voters do not reason independently from first principles, they rely on shared heuristics, partisan cues, and media narratives that are correlated across the electorate rather than independent of it. Correlated error does not cancel it, rather, it compounds, in the same way a biased poll does not improve by adding more respondents drawn from the same biased sample. Because the ignorance rational ignorance predicts is systematic rather than random. The Condorcet Jury Theorem's central assumption is not satisfied by mass democratic electorates, and its guarantee of aggregate reliability does not transfer to the case this paper is concerned with. Therefore, a fully rigorous defense would require empirical work on the correlation structure of voter error that exceeds this paper's scope. But it shows that the objection cannot be assumed to succeed simply by invoking the theorem's name, and that the burden shifts back to showing voter errors are independent enough for aggregation to rescue the outcome.

Final Note

None of these four objections is fully resolved by the replies offered here, and this paper does not claim they are. The competence definition problem leaves open which specific criteria are ultimately best, the historical misuse objection is blunted by a real structural distinction but leaves risk that demands careful institutional design. The proceduralist objection is answered only on the terms this paper has already defended in Section 2, terms a committed proceduralist need not accept. The aggregation objection is answered only insofar as voter error can be shown to be correlated rather than independent, a claim this paper defends on the existing evidence but does not treat as beyond dispute. What this section has shown is narrower and more honest than a claim of total victory. This paper suggests that plural voting withstands each of these challenges more successfully than any other mechanism.

Conclusion

This paper began with an asymmetry easy to overlook precisely because it is so familiar, that political power, unlike every other form of consequential authority in modern life, is granted without any demonstrated test of competence. Section 1 showed this is not accidental. Downs' theory of rational

ignorance demonstrated that voter ignorance is the predictable outcome of reasoning correctly, not a failure of individual reasoning, and decades of empirical evidence confirmed this is a stable structural feature of democracy. Brennan's extension gave this moral weight since voting is an exercise of power over others, its predictable incompetence is a problem for legitimacy itself.

Section 2 addressed what legitimacy requires. Between proceduralism's claim that fair process is sufficient and instrumentalism's claim that outcomes matter most, this paper defended the instrumentalist standard, showing that even Estlund's more moderate hybrid position cannot certify that universal suffrage meets its own threshold.

Section 3 turned this standard into an institutional answer. Two requirements followed: a solution must correct for rational ignorance's effect on outcomes, and it must preserve procedural inclusion. Mill's model of plural voting was shown to satisfy both simultaneously.

Section 4 tested this solution honestly. The difficulty of defining competence fairly remains open. The historical misuse of literacy tests to disenfranchise Black voters stands as a genuine warning. The proceduralist's objection cannot be fully answered on terms a proceduralist is not required to accept. The Condorcet-based aggregation objection cannot be dismissed outright, only shown to rest on an independence assumption. Plural voting however withstands these challenges more successfully than pure universal suffrage or its harsher epistocratic rivals.

Competence and inclusion have been treated as though they were rivals, which forces a choice between a system that includes everyone equally and one that governs well. Mill's model refuses that choice. It shows that a single structure can hold both commitments without asking either to yield. Democracy has spent centuries defending the right to a voice. It has spent far less time asking whether every voice should carry the same weight regardless of what stands behind it. That is the question this paper leaves at democracy's door, unanswered by tradition, and no longer avoidable by argument.

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