

Epistemic Responsibility in Voting: Proportionate Care and the Ethics of Informed Participation

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Abstract

This paper develops a normative account of informed democratic participation. It argues that voting is not only a civic right or an expression of political identity, but also a shared exercise of public power that generates duties of responsible judgement. Because votes help authorize laws, leaders, and policies that bind others, citizens who vote owe one another more than sincerity or turnout: they owe a reasonable measure of epistemic care. Drawing on the ethics of assertion, Rawlsian public reason, Aristotelian virtue ethics, Habermasian deliberation, and Fricker's account of epistemic injustice, the paper formulates the principle of Proportionate Epistemic Care (PEC). According to PEC, voters ought to seek and use evidence, reasons, and reliable political information in proportion to the stakes of the decision and to their feasible capacities. The paper distinguishes this view from elitist or competence-based restrictions on suffrage by pairing PEC with an Enablement Constraint: democratic institutions may expect responsible participation only when they provide fair access to civic education, accessible information, deliberative opportunities, media accountability, and reliable fact-checking. The article's contribution is to defend an egalitarian form of epistemic responsibility: democratic equality does not require indifference to judgement, but neither does epistemic responsibility justify exclusion. Responsible voting is best understood as non-negligent, publicly minded participation supported by institutions that enable citizens to deliberate, decide, and disagree responsibly.

Keywords

informed voting, Proportionate Epistemic Care, democratic citizenship, public reason, civic judgement, epistemic justice, Enablement Constraint

Introduction: Voting as Shared Political Power

Voting is often viewed as a right, a civic duty, or a means by which citizens of a democracy express their political preference. Each of these descriptions captures something important about democratic life, yet none fully explains the responsibility citizens owe one another when they participate in collective decision-making. A vote is not a private preference that disappears after it is cast. It contributes, however modestly, to the authorization of governments, laws, and policies that will bind citizens who may disagree deeply about values, interests, and public priorities. For this reason, voting is not only a moral or procedural act; it is also an epistemically significant practice.

The central question, therefore, is not simply whether citizens should vote, but how they ought to vote when the exercise of that right affects others. Contemporary democracies face persistent epistemic difficulties: widespread political ignorance, misinformation, partisan manipulation, unequal access to credible information, and social conditions that make careful political judgement easier for some citizens than for others. Existing works on this issue have responded to these difficulties in different ways. For instance, Brennan and Lomasky drew attention to the moral dangers of uninformed or irrational voting. Also, Maskivker in a related development, defended the idea that citizens have a duty to vote well. Equally, Giavazzi argued that voting bears an assertoric or advocative force just as Estlund examined the tension between democratic authority and epistemic competence (Brennan & Lomasky, 2016; Maskivker, 2016; Giavazzi, 2023; Estlund, 2008).

The paper also speaks to adjacent work in democratic epistemology and deliberative democracy. Estlund's epistemic proceduralism shows how democratic legitimacy may depend partly on the epistemic value of democratic procedures without collapsing into epistocracy (Estlund, 2008). Fishkin's work on deliberative democracy and deliberative polling demonstrates how structured access to balanced information can make citizen judgement more reflective (Fishkin, 2018). Curato, Dryzek, Ercan, Hendriks, and Niemeyer similarly argue that deliberative democratic research has moved beyond utopian aspiration by showing how deliberative practices can operate in real political contexts (Curato et al., 2017). These literatures support the present paper's claim that epistemic responsibility should be understood not as a barrier to participation but as a responsibility that democratic institutions must help citizens fulfil.

One response lowers expectation of political knowledge in the name of fairness and inclusion, thereby placing turnout above the quality of judgement. Another response treats ignorance as a reason for limiting political power and recommends alternatives grounded in competence or expertise (Brennan & Lomasky, 2016). Neither response is satisfactory. The first risks normalising careless participation, while the second threatens political equality and may easily be abused. This paper therefore develops a third approach. Beginning from the idea of equal political power, it asks how that power ought to be exercised under conditions of shared authority. Rather than grounding civic duties in obedience to law or deference to experts, it understands voting as a collaborative practice through which citizens help to generate common political outcomes. From this perspective, epistemic accountability is neither optional nor exclusionary; it is a basic requirement of fair participation in an activity that distributes power over others.

This paper builds on these earlier contributions but seeks to avoid two extremes. On the one hand, it rejects the view that democratic equality requires indifference to the quality of voters' judgement. On the other hand, it rejects elitist approaches that treat ignorance as a reason to restrict political power to the more knowledgeable. Its contribution is to formulate the principle of Proportionate Epistemic Care (PEC), according to which citizens who vote ought to take epistemic care proportionate to the public stakes of the decision and to their feasible capacities. PEC is neither a demand for expertise nor a justification for exclusion. It is a standard of non-negligence grounded in reciprocity among political equals. To prevent such a standard from becoming oppressive, the paper pairs it with an Enablement Constraint: institutions may expect responsible participation only when they also provide the civic, informational, and deliberative conditions that make responsible participation possible.

The discussion proceeds in six parts. The first section presents voting as public endorsement and explains the relation between voting, shared power, and civic reciprocity. The second develops the theoretical framework, beginning with Rawlsian public reason before formulating PEC as the paper's central normative principle. The third section examines civic epistemic character and the responsible use of political shortcuts. The fourth introduces the Enablement Constraint and shows why epistemic responsibility must be institutionally supported and connected to epistemic justice. The fifth considers objections concerning elitism, feasibility, expressive voting, voter suppression, and universal suffrage. The sixth outlines reforms capable of supporting epistemic enablement before the conclusion draws the argument together.

Voting as Public Endorsement and Civic Reciprocity

Voting as a Public Endorsement

Although voting is usually performed privately, its meaning is public. A vote participates in a collective process through which leaders are chosen, laws are authorized, and coercive public decisions are made. It is therefore different from a merely personal preference or private act of self-expression. The voter helps to shape outcomes that others must live with, including those who did not consent to them. In this respect, voting resembles other epistemic practices, such as assertion, testimony, and jury deliberation, where

individual contributions are combined into collective judgements with serious consequences. Such practices generate responsibilities because others depend on the reliability of the contributions made within them (Giavazzi, 2023).

Votes, like assertions, are actions that carry a claim about what should be done. To vote for a policy or candidate is, implicitly, to affirm that there are sufficient public reasons for supporting that option. Citizens may disagree about values, priorities, and political ideals, but voting still presupposes a minimal concern for reality, including relevant facts, plausible reasoning, and foreseeable consequences.

Epistemic Reciprocity Among Citizens

The obligation in question is neither owed simply to the state nor derived merely from submission to political authority. It arises from the fact that citizens jointly exercise political power. When people participate in collective decision-making, they may reasonably expect one another to contribute in ways that are not careless, dishonest, or wilfully indifferent to relevant evidence. This mutual dependence creates a basic expectation of epistemic care. The moral structure is reciprocal: if I expect others to take my interests seriously when they vote, I must extend the same consideration to them. Voting on the basis of easily avoidable misinformation, or refusing to consider serious counterevidence, exposes others to epistemic risk without sufficient justification. It therefore violates the norms of fair cooperation among political equals (Maskivker, 2016). This relational account does not support paternalism. It does not assume that some citizens possess superior authority over others; rather, it grounds accountability in equality itself. Because citizens exercise power over one another, they are responsible for the way that power is used.

From Public Reason to Proportionate Epistemic Care

a. Rawlsian Political Liberalism and Public Reason

Rawls's political liberalism provides an important normative background for this argument. In societies marked by reasonable pluralism, citizens cannot be expected to agree on comprehensive moral, religious, or philosophical doctrines. Nevertheless, Rawls maintains that political power should be exercised in ways that other citizens, regarded as free and equal, can reasonably accept. The idea of public reason expresses this demand (Rawls, 1993). Public reason is not only moral; it is also epistemic. It presupposes that citizens attend to publicly accessible considerations, including evidence, reasons, and facts that others can in principle examine. Voting based on conspiracy theories or manifestly false claims fails this standard, not because it violates ideological neutrality, but because it undermines the epistemic reciprocity on which public reason depends.

The idea of responsibility in voting discussed in this paper can be linked to Rawls's idea of public reason. Rawls argues that, in making political decisions, citizens should be guided by reasons that other citizens can understand and reasonably accept. In the same way, PEC does not require every voter to stand in public and explain why he or she voted in a particular way. However, it expects voters to think carefully before making their choices and to base their decisions on reasons, facts and public interest rather than on false information, personal prejudice or mere sentiment.

At the same time, Rawls reminds us that citizens do not all have the same knowledge, education or social advantage. It would therefore be unfair to expect every voter to have the same level of political understanding. The responsibility expected from a voter should depend on the seriousness of the decision, the information available and the person's ability to understand the issues involved. In other words, people should make a reasonable effort to be properly informed, but they should not be judged by a standard that ignores their different circumstances and opportunities (Rawls, 1993).

B. Proportionate Epistemic Care

The main idea of this paper is what I call Proportionate Epistemic Care (PEC). Put simply, it means that citizens should take reasonable care before they vote. They should try, as far as their situation allows, to understand the issue at stake, consider the likely effect of their vote on other people and base their choice on relevant facts and reasons. PEC does not expect every voter to be an expert or to possess the same level of political knowledge. Rather, it asks citizens not to be careless where they could reasonably have made an effort to know better. Since the outcome of an election affects everybody, voters have a duty to avoid mistakes that they could have avoided with reasonable care (Giavazzi, 2023).

This responsibility has two sides. First, the more serious the likely effect of a decision, the more carefully citizens should consider it. A vote that may affect people's basic rights, public resources, safety or future wellbeing deserves more attention than one with little public effect. Second, what can fairly be expected from voters depends on their own circumstances. A person's time, education, language, disability, financial situation and access to reliable information may affect how much he or she can realistically find out before voting. PEC therefore does not divide citizens into intelligent and unintelligent people, nor does it support taking away anyone's right to vote. It simply asks whether a voter has shown reasonable care in the light of the opportunities and limitations available to him or her. Giavazzi's account similarly argues that voting carries responsibilities because a vote expresses support for a particular political course of action.

Why Voting Without Care Is Wrong in a Democracy

Negligent voting weakens democratic legitimacy, not due to the generation of erroneous outcomes, but because it contravenes the principles of equitable collaboration among political equals. It is possible to disagree reasonably while being careful with knowledge. PEC does not penalise divergent voting but rather reckless voting that imposes costs on others.

Civic Epistemic Character and Responsible Shortcuts

PEC is a principle governing political action, but it remains incomplete without an account of civic epistemic character. Aristotelian virtue ethics offers an important complement. Aristotle understands virtue as a stable disposition to perceive, deliberate, and act well within a practice (Aristotle, trans. 2000). In the context of democratic citizenship, responsible voting involves more than rule following. It requires habits of attentiveness to evidence, intellectual humility, practical wisdom (*phronesis*), and willingness to revise judgement when reasons require it. These virtues enable citizens to make context-sensitive judgements without imposing a single rigid standard of political knowledge on all voters. From this perspective, responsible voting is an expression of civic character: citizens cultivate habits of inquiry appropriate to their role as co-authors of collective decisions.

Epistemic Shortcuts and Delegation

No individual citizen can master the whole complexity of modern politics. Responsible voters must often rely on epistemic shortcuts, such as party cues, expert testimony, endorsements, civic organisations, and trusted media. PEC does not condemn the use of such shortcuts; it evaluates whether they are used responsibly (Brennan & Lomasky, 2016). Delegation is epistemically acceptable when the intermediaries relied upon are transparent, accountable, and open to correction. Blind loyalty, by contrast, may become negligent when contrary evidence is obvious and accessible.

The Enablement Constraint and Epistemic Justice

If PEC is to be a defensible standard, a further question arises: can citizens reasonably meet epistemic expectations under existing social and political conditions? In many democracies, the answer is only partly affirmative. Information asymmetries, misinformation, unequal education, inaccessible public

communication, and systemic exclusion all hinder responsible participation. This gives rise to the Enablement Constraint which simply implies that democratic institutions may legitimately expect epistemic responsibility from citizens only when they also provide fair access to the resources required for minimally competent participation.

Fricker's idea of epistemic injustice helps to show why the circumstances of voters must be considered. Injustice occurs when people are treated unfairly in matters of knowledge. A person may be ignored or not believed because of prejudice, or may lack the language, information or support needed to understand and explain his or her experience properly (Fricker, 2007). In voting, this means that some citizens face greater difficulty than others in understanding political issues and making informed choices. If this is ignored, the demand that voters should be well informed may become another way of disadvantaging people who are already excluded.

Habermas also stresses the value of discussion in democratic life. Democratic decisions are more acceptable when citizens can give reasons, listen to others and discuss issues with mutual respect (Habermas, 1996). PEC applies this idea to individual voters. Although voting is private, citizens should try to make their choices on the basis of reasons they can defend, rather than on false information, prejudice or mere impulse.

Objections and Responses

PEC may favour the privileged

A major concern is that asking voters to be informed may favour people with better education, more time and easier access to reliable information. This concern is valid. Claims about political competence have often been used to suggest that only certain people are fit to vote. Brennan and Lomasky (1993) also remind us that voting is often shaped by identity and expression, not only by careful judgment.

However, PEC does not set one level of political knowledge for everyone. It asks citizens to make a reasonable effort to understand the issue before them, taking account of what they can realistically do in their own circumstances. It also places a duty on public institutions to provide clear information, civic education and accessible public communication. PEC is not meant to exclude citizens; it is meant to help them participate more meaningfully.

Politics is complex

Another objection is that politics is too complex and misinformation too common for ordinary citizens to make well-informed choices. PEC does not require voters to become experts in every policy area. It asks them to take reasonable steps before voting. This may involve reading a trusted voter guide, comparing the main positions of candidates or parties, checking important claims, listening to different views or discussing issues with informed people.

The responsibility does not rest on voters alone. Democratic institutions must reduce the barriers that make it difficult for citizens to obtain reliable information. Public fact-checking, civic education, balanced voter guides and forums for discussion can help citizens make more considered decisions. Research on deliberative democracy shows that people's judgments can improve when they receive balanced information, have time to reflect and hear different views (Curato et al., 2017; Fishkin, 2018).

Voting is personal expression

Voting is also a way for citizens to express identity, values, loyalty and personal experience. PEC does not deny this. However, voting does more than express a personal feeling; it contributes to decisions that affect the rights, welfare and future of other people. For this reason, citizens should not vote only on the basis of emotion, group loyalty or personal dislike. They should also consider facts, reasons and the likely

public consequences of their choices. PEC does not silence genuine political expression. It simply asks citizens to use their political freedom with reasonable care for those who will live with the outcome.

PEC could suppress voters

A more serious objection is that standards of political knowledge may be used to deny some people the right to vote. History shows that literacy tests and similar requirements have been used to exclude poor people, racial minorities and other disadvantaged citizens. This danger must be taken seriously.

PEC does not support political tests, literacy requirements or any legal rule that makes voting dependent on state-approved knowledge. It is a moral guide for responsible voting, not a legal qualification for voting. The role of the state is not to decide who is intelligent enough to vote. Its role is to provide civic education, clear information, language and disability support, and protection against political deception. The aim is to support citizens, not screen them out.

Equal voting rights remain central

Equal voting rights must remain central to democracy. PEC does not challenge universal suffrage; it begins with it. Every adult citizen should have an equal right to vote because every citizen has equal political standing. At the same time, voting is a shared power, and its consequences affect the whole community. PEC strengthens universal suffrage by asking citizens to use that shared power with reasonable care, while insisting that society must give them a fair opportunity to do so. Giavazzi's work similarly considers voters' responsibilities without treating political equality as a reason for exclusion.

Supporting Responsible Voting

PEC requires more than asking citizens to be careful. Citizens must be given the support needed to make responsible choices. Schools and civic programmes should help people assess information, recognise misleading claims, understand basic political issues and disagree without hostility. Public bodies should provide clear, non-partisan voter guides, transparent fact-checking and simple explanations of the likely effects of major policies.

Citizens' assemblies, public forums and deliberative polls can give people time to hear balanced information, consider opposing views and discuss important public questions. Political parties, candidates and media organisations should be more open about the sources of their claims, campaign funding and methods of influencing voters. Access to education, understandable information, disability support and language assistance should also be treated as part of democratic inclusion.

These reforms can improve public judgment and strengthen trust in democratic institutions. Their purpose is not to replace ordinary voters with experts, but to create conditions in which ordinary citizens can use their equal political rights with greater confidence and care. Deliberative research supports the view that citizens can reach more informed and reflective judgments when they receive balanced information, time for discussion and an opportunity to hear competing arguments (Curato et al., 2017; Fishkin, 2018).[\[amphilsoc\]](#)[\[perryworldhouse.upenn\]](#)

The reforms will face practical difficulties, including political resistance, lack of resources, distrust of public institutions and unequal access to digital information. Yet these difficulties do not remove the duty to act. If democracy depends partly on responsible participation, democratic institutions must reduce the conditions that make responsible participation difficult.

Conclusion

Democratic integrity cannot be measured by access to the ballot alone. It also depends on whether the exercise of political power is guided by forms of judgement that citizens can reasonably defend to one another. This paper has argued that voting is a collaborative epistemic practice and that citizens who

participate in it owe one another a proportionate measure of epistemic care. Such care does not require expertise, ideological uniformity, or the exclusion of less advantaged citizens. It requires that voters avoid avoidable negligence, attend to relevant evidence, and recognise that their political choices help to authorize outcomes for others.

The paper has also argued that epistemic responsibility must be institutionally enabled. In unequal societies, citizens cannot be blamed for failures that arise from poor education, manipulative media systems, poverty, exclusion, or lack of access to reliable public information. The Enablement Constraint therefore prevents PEC from becoming elitist: democratic institutions must provide the conditions under which citizens can participate responsibly. Properly understood, epistemic responsibility does not weaken universal suffrage; it deepens it by asking both citizens and institutions to take democratic judgement seriously. A democracy committed to epistemic care is not a government of experts over the people, but a community of citizens empowered to deliberate, decide, and disagree responsibly.

The argument therefore points towards a conception of democracy that is both egalitarian and epistemically serious. It does not ask that the ignorant be excluded, nor that ordinary citizens become experts. It asks that democratic societies take seriously the conditions under which citizens form political judgement. Where citizens are enabled to inquire, deliberate, and vote with proportionate care, democracy becomes not only a procedure for counting preferences, but a shared practice of responsible self-government.

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