

# Book Review | An Epistemic Theory of Democracy by Robert E. Goodin and Kai Spiekermann

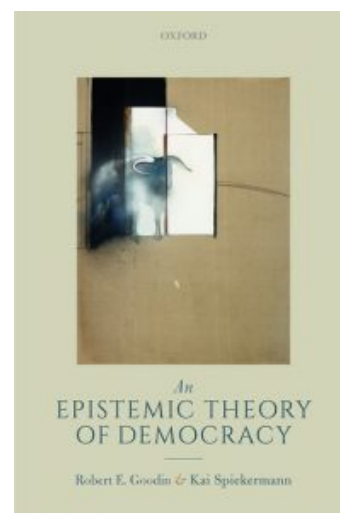
*In An Epistemic Theory of Democracy, Robert E. Goodin and Kai Spiekermann offer a systematic argument articulating the epistemic value of democracy, aiming to show that democracies have an important advantage over other forms of government due to their truth-tracking potential. This instrumental argument in favour of democratic institutions is an important contribution to debates surrounding the value of democracy at a time of political turbulence and abundant scepticism about the operation of politics, writes Camilo Ardila.*



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***An Epistemic Theory of Democracy.* Robert E. Goodin and Kai Spiekermann. Oxford University Press. 2019.**

In their recent book, Robert E. Goodin and Kai Spiekermann, well-known scholars in the field of political philosophy and political science, systematically articulate their ideas on the epistemic value of democracy. [An Epistemic Theory of Democracy](#) – winner of APSA Ideas, Knowledge, and Politics Section Best Book Award 2019 – presents an argument that goes, roughly speaking, as follows: democracies have an important advantage over other forms of government in the sense that they have a truth-tracking potential. In other words, democratic institutions tend to reach the right conclusions in political terms under practical conditions of competence, independence and sincerity. In order to structure this argument, the book builds on the Condorcet Jury Theorem (CJT) as a theoretical platform intended to provide positive demonstrations in favour of the truth-tracking tendency of democratic institutions. This epistemic argument undoubtedly arises in a historical context characterised by a growing scepticism in relation to the epistemic value of democratic procedures when it comes to political questions.



From a structural point of view, *An Epistemic Theory of Democracy* has five constitutive parts. In the first section, Goodin and Spiekermann reconstruct the CJT in its classical sense. As they explain, ‘the classic CJT framework involves a group composed of  $n$  voters making a choice between two alternatives by means of majority rule. [...] Exactly one of the two alternatives is correct’ (17). This framework underpins two conclusions in epistemic terms: ‘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’ (5). In this section, Goodin and Spiekermann also consider some of the theoretical limitations of the CJT and possible reinterpretations for contemporary times.

In the second part of the book, the authors evaluate practical methods to enhance, epistemically speaking, democratic results in the theoretical context of the CJT. The third section of the book analyses traditional practices in the world of politics through the lens of the CJT, including factionalism and pluralism as possible challenges to the existence of common knowledge in the evaluation of political questions. The fourth part discusses some of the institutional observations derived from the results of the application of the CJT in their epistemic theory of democracy. The final section not only insists on some general conclusions about the epistemic value of democracy, but also analyses two concrete cases from 2016 in its epilogue: the presidential election of Donald Trump in the United States and Brexit in the United Kingdom.

One of the relevant aspects of this epistemic account of democracy has to do with the evaluation of these emblematic examples of unexpected results in the context of democratic institutions. In the opinion of the authors, the real problem with these results comes from an important violation of the ideal conditions defined by the CJT. Essentially, Brexit and Trump’s election were based on lies that entailed a strategic manipulation of the electorate in the UK and the US respectively. These two situations materialise what the authors frequently reiterate as one of their main conclusions on the value of democracy: ‘the argument for the epistemic authority of the majority is conditional on favourable epistemic circumstances’ (311). In this regard, these bad outcomes cannot be considered part of an appropriate operation of democratic institutions insofar as they involved relevant violations of the ideal conditions defined by the CJT. To put it simply, democracies tend to promote right conclusions about political questions under very specific circumstances, but democratic decisions can also suppose wrong results in disadvantageous conditions.

Based on this theoretical and empirical framework, Goodin and Spiekermann present a persuasive, well-organised and solid argument with regard to the epistemic value of democratic institutions in contemporary times. Even so, their argumentation provokes additional questions among those interested in discussions about the role of knowledge in politics. Except for Chapters Thirteen and Fourteen devoted to pluralism and factionalism respectively, *An Epistemic Theory of Democracy* embraces a form of independent standard of political truth in the sense that it is possible to determine objectively the correct nature of political decisions. This crucial assumption seems to give a truth-confirming role to democratic institutions rather than a truth-constitutive one. That is to say, the operation of democratic methods from this epistemic perspective supposes that people can have access to political truths, but they still need democratic methods in order to reaffirm these right conclusions. Otherwise, how do we know whether democratic methods will reach the right conclusions without previous knowledge of what is correct in the first place? However, if we already know what the correct answers to political questions are, why do we need, epistemically speaking, democracies to confirm these?

This point touches on what the authors recognise as one of the limitations of their epistemic theory of democracy: a possible distinction between discussions about facts and questions of value or interest in the sphere of politics. As Goodin and Spiekermann mention at different moments, there are at least some factual truths involved in political discussions, such as the UK’s official payments to the EU or the number of migrants charged with terrorism in the US judiciary system. In those cases, it seems crystal clear that competent, independent and sincere voters would be more inclined to cast their votes based on these objective accounts of the state of affairs rather than misrepresentations of reality or sheer lies. Even so, without the assumption of common knowledge to be acquired in the world of politics, there are more controversial questions to address through democratic mechanisms. This includes political tensions between diverse perspectives and understandings of the world. In these cases, the existence of previous knowledge of ‘the right decision’ seems to be less clear and straightforward than an epistemic theory of democracy might suppose. Instead, the existence of democratic methods might have a truth-constitutive value by virtue of their potential to solve some of these tensions emerging from the absence of an objective standard of truth.

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In general, *An Epistemic Theory of Democracy* makes an instrumental argument in favour of democratic institutions based on the evidence of the CJT. Even though there are some positive demonstrations derived from mathematical calculations in its discursive elaboration, this book remains generally accessible to non-specialist audiences interested in debates on normative theories of democracy. In addition to its overall argument pointing to the epistemic advantages of democratic institutions due to their truth-tracking potential, this book provides a broad panorama of classical and contemporary sources and debates in relation to the role of knowledge in politics. Goodin and Spiekermann reanimate these theoretical discussions on the epistemic value of democracy in times of abundant scepticism about the operation of politics. In this sense, their book makes an important contribution to our evaluation of democratic institutions in moments of political commotion.

*This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of Democratic Audit. It was first published by the [LSE Review of Books blog](#).*

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### About the author

**Camilo Ardila** is a PhD Candidate in Politics at the University of Edinburgh. His PhD research focuses on the democratic foundations of public participation in the final phase of armed conflicts and the formation of peace settlements. Previously, he completed the MSc International Political Theory at the University of Edinburgh.

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