

Governments should resist the ‘technocratic temptation’ and maintain their commitment to democracy.

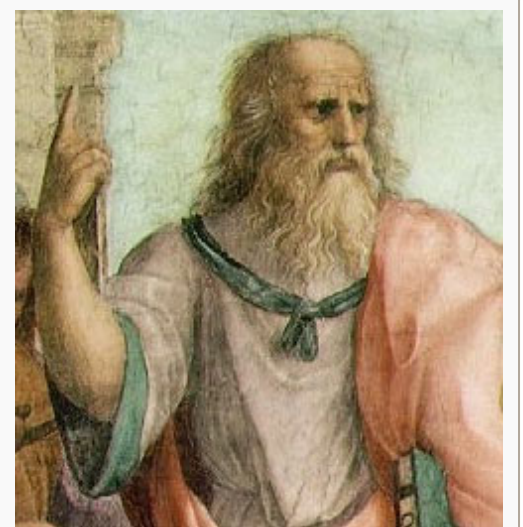
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In a recent [EUROPP article](#), Cathrine Holst presented an argument in favour of ‘epistocracy’, or expert rule. [Tom Angier](#) writes that while arguments for expert rule can be traced as far back as Ancient Greece, a modern conception of epistocracy is doomed to be either ‘banal or dangerous’. He argues that we should resist the temptation to trade democracy for expertise.



Greece: the birthplace of democracy. True or false? Well, true in a sense. Since the financial crisis, the Greek people have rediscovered their political voice, a voice first heard – albeit less shrilly, and on a far smaller scale – in the ancient Athenian *polis*, or city-state. Ancient Greece was, indeed, the first major democratic power, even if those qualified to vote and participate in political debate were relatively few (namely, citizen males of a certain age). When it comes to political philosophy, however, Greece is the birthplace of radically anti-democratic thought. Plato and Aristotle have bequeathed us moral and political theories that are overwhelmingly suspicious of *vox populi*. Why so?

In Plato’s case, he had seen the Athenian democratic State execute his great teacher, Socrates, while Aristotle, as tutor of Alexander the Great, was closer to those wielding imperial power than to the *dēmos*. But besides these biographical motivations, both philosophers were wedded to a paradigm of political decision-making that excludes, or at least thoroughly sidelines the people: namely, political *expertise*. The Greek word for expertise is *technē*, so it is no surprise that a major rival to democracy (the rule of the people) is technocracy (the rule of the experts). Plato ascribes *politikē technē*, or political expertise, to his philosopher-kings, and it is this that supposedly qualifies them to rule over the people. They are presented as knowing both what is in the people’s interests, and how to achieve this, better than the people themselves.



Plato (as depicted by Raphael)

Platonism, or something approaching it, has recently made a come-back in political theory. Going under the name of ‘epistocracy’, or the rule of the knowers – Plato tends to use *epistēmē* (knowledge) interchangeably with *technē* – the idea is that, at least under ‘modern’ conditions, experts should have a far greater say in political decision-making than the canons of democratic political theory allow. As [Cathrine Holst](#) of the EPISTO Project puts it, a more epistocratic or expert-led politics holds out the prospect of ‘resolute and knowledge-based decision-making’, embodying ‘procedures that optimise efficiency and rationality’, thereby enabling societies to ‘deal with the new risks and hazards’ of a globalised world. This prospect no doubt has its attractions, attractions that have, as I’ve indicated, an ancient pedigree. Let me elaborate on this further.

Plato’s basic claim is that the *dēmos* is unreliable. Although it may hit, occasionally, on the right policies, this is fundamentally a matter of luck, and any belief that is true by accident cannot be knowledge. The only epistemically respectable position, then, is that of the *technitēs*, the expert or man of skill, who has a firm grasp of the rules and norms governing a particular area of enquiry and practice. To take some examples: the shoe-maker, ship-builder, doctor or general is master over his own domain, delivering not only the right *answers*, but also the right *outcomes*. And the expert who gains Plato’s greatest respect –

bar the advent of the philosopher-king – is the mathematician, who deals with the most stable, most certain, and most generally applicable knowledge there is.

Such *technē*-knowledge lays the groundwork for today's epistocratic hopes. It sets the standard for what Holst calls 'the most rational outcomes', instantiating the kind of 'decision quality' and 'fine-grained ... analyses' she suggests should inform the political sphere. Environmental experts healing the earth, health experts curing our bodies, terrorism experts securing our borders, and economics experts sorting out our cash-flow problems: on the basis of such expertise, we would not only maximise our chances of getting the benefits we seek, the costs of intractable democratic disagreement would, in all likelihood, be circumvented. As Plato [speculates](#), if moral and political debate were subject to the kind of decision-procedures seen optimally in mathematics, we 'would proceed to count and soon resolve our difference'.

This vision of democratic politics ceding ground to expertise is either banal, or dangerous. On the one hand, if those in favour of a more epistocratic State want politicians to (at least) consult or (at most) defer to experts, they are peddling banalities – for both happen already. Politicians cannot master the multiple forms of expertise relevant to even a single section of one government department. But more crucially, there are significant disagreements between experts even within limited domains of expertise, and these disagreements are often themselves fundamentally political. So to appeal to 'the experts' as if this would yield univocal, or (*per impossibile*) politically neutral results, is naïve. The rule of experts would generate not expert rule, but a cacophony of conflicting views and interests.

On the other hand, if the epistocratic argument is that politics itself constitutes an expertise, this is dangerous. [Plutarch](#), for one, denies the danger, decrying as 'ridiculous' those who require that the oarsman be qualified, but let 'guide the helm he ... who was never taught'. But critics of technocracy are not ridiculous. They recognise that the 'skill' of the politician is, at best, a hodge-podge of different aptitudes. Psychological acuity, rhetorical panache, some historical knowledge, the ability to compromise, but also a certain ruthlessness: all go to make up the good politician. Above all, however, the good politician must be devoted to the people he or she represents – and it is this democratic, people-centric commitment that makes the assimilation of politics to a *technē* inevitably misleading. Why so? There are at least two reasons.

First, as Aristotle realised (unlike Plato), human beings introduce a host of complexities into any proposed course of action, since they have manifold needs that differ over time and space. This holds far more at the political level than for more circumscribed and less people-centric crafts (e.g. chess), where the variables are fewer. Secondly, *technē* or expertise consists essentially, as Aristotle also realised, in knowledge of various means-end techniques. It follows that it stands in need, always and necessarily, of being moulded in an ethical direction. So when those sympathetic to epistocracy recommend that politicians deploy expertise to save the environment, contain terror, sort out the economy, etc., they gloss over the fact that these are matters of deep ethical controversy to begin with, which technocratic proficiency *per se* has no power to decide.

If the dilemma I've set out is accurate, and the epistocrat's counsel is either banal or dangerously unrealistic, it does not follow that democracy itself is lacking in dangers. Indeed, democracy *is* dangerous, as Michael Mann's [The Dark Side of Democracy](#), and the slide to the right in countries like the Netherlands points to. But it is less dangerous than its rivals – even than Holst's 'democratic epistocracy', which (implausibly and somewhat sinisterly) trumpets its 'basic, but minimal democratic standards'. For the great virtue of genuine democracy lies in recognising that, as [Hegel](#) puts it, 'we do not need to be ... professionals to acquire knowledge of matters of universal interest'. It follows that if any 'professionals' set themselves up as experts in matters of universal, political interest, the *dēmos* and its representatives should not hesitate to put them firmly in their place.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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