Democracy's Discontent: The Problem of Knowledge and a Solution

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Abstract

Democracy has been widely claimed to be the best form of government there is. One reason for which is the power that it confers to the people. But what happens if the people do not have the correct knowledge to exercise that power? This is the problem of knowledge in a democracy. Every election, the electorate has the power to vote certain political candidates into office, a clear exercise of democracy, but just like any other power, this can be misused. In this paper, I seek to advance a framework to guide the electorate in voting the suitable political candidates into office. I call this framework political meritocracy and lay out its components. While this framework is commonsensical, I bring out some of its political implications, which are largely counter-intuitive. Then, I explore how this framework can be inculcated through formal education and what I call enlightened political discourse. While the framework of political meritocracy does not wipe out the problem of knowledge, it goes a long way towards lessening it.

Keywords: Democracy, Political Meritocracy, Technical Competence, Moral Integrity, Identity Politics

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Although it could be argued that democracy is established as the best form of government, especially by inherently promoting such values as freedom, equality and self-government, it has its own unique problems that need to be continually addressed. Our own history has shown that Filipinos have capitalized on their power, given in a democracy, through such momentous events as EDSA Revolution, having been able to oust the then President Ferdinand Marcos, who clearly held the highest political position. Indeed, it is only right that, as Michael Saward observes, "the word [democracy] carries ideas that resonate powerfully with aspirations for freedom and justice across varied cultures and systems."[2]

Nevertheless, difficult problems still beset democracy, one of which is the fact that there seems to have been officials, elected by the people, who are either incompetent or generally self-interested, without a wide-ranging regard for the well-being of people these officials are supposed to represent. But these officials are gifted with their positions because of the people who voted for them. For our purposes, let us assume that the process and results of the election are fair. In this case, a question naturally emerges: how come that the people would vote for candidates who are either incompetent and/or without regard for their moral duties to the people? One plausible explanation is that the people are not knowledgeable enough to decide whose political candidate deserves to win in the election.

This is the problem of political ignorance, as political thinkers such as Ilya Somin call it.[3] It highlights the intellectual

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[2] Michael Saward, *The Terms of Democracy* (Maldin: Polity Press, 1998), 1.
[3] Ilya Somin, "Deliberative Democracy and Political Ignorance" in *Critical Review: A Journal of Politics and Society*, 22:2-3 (2010), 253-279; Ilya Somin, "Why Political Ignorance Undermines the Wisdom of the Many" in *Critical Review: A Journal of Politics and Society*, 26:1-2 (2014), 151-169.

inability of voters to choose the right candidate for them. This inability may be due to lack of education or more generally because voters simply do not have the time to learn about the intricacies of political issues and the suitability of candidates. Ross Harrison expressed the problem implicitly by noting the importance of knowledge in political decision-making:

> Knowledge is clearly something we take to be of value. We want our political decisions to be informed. If one answer is better than another for a community making a decision, then that answer is the one which the community ought to reach. Therefore, it would seem that the right form of decision procedure for that community should be the one which produces that answer. Yet this does not reliably happen with democratic decision procedures.[4]

In line with that, I would like to call this the problem of knowledge in a democracy (henceforth, 'the problem of knowledge'). Rather than use the term ignorance which is derogatory and misleading, I prefer knowledge because it implies that voters know, or at least have the ability and resources to know something about political issues and candidates, especially the ones that matter to them. I don't deny that there are poor places in the Philippines where many families have not finished even elementary, or high school level education.[5] But many Filipinos, even the ones who did not finish high school, inform themselves of political matters through listening to the radio, watching the news and talking about politics. The main problem by then is whether they are getting enough or correct knowledge.[6] Thomas Cristiano, a contemporary political philosopher, has this to say about the problem:

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[4] Ross Harrison, *Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 148.

[5] It is saddening that there are still places in the country that have no electricity and where most residents are poor and uneducated, even on the most basic level. This, however, is a different problem that I think requires a more radical solution than what I am going to propose here.

[6] An anonymous reviewer for this journal pointed out one significant problem arising from the problem of knowledge, which is its tendency to make people less interested in voting. Since many voters have inadequate knowledge

> The basic problem is that ordinary citizens in modern society are not in a position to spend the time and exert the energy to acquire the kind of understanding that is necessary for democratic citizenship. Modern citizens are confronted with a bewildering array of facts and an overwhelmingly complex set of social problems and have little time to contribute to understanding these matters and little power over the outcomes of decision-making.[7]

The problem of knowledge arises because voters cannot be expected to know about all the sides of major political issues and every political candidate who runs for government office. It is for this lack of knowledge that actors and famous personalities running for office have the advantage of being recognized, and even loved, by the people even before they speak about their agendas, if they have any agenda at all. But the fame of someone does not necessarily translate into being an effective government leader. In fact, I would go so far as to say that even a long experience in politics does not automatically translate into being a suitable political leader for one may have political experience but remain inefficient or morally callous. Also, the problem of knowledge underscores the difficulty of getting the right information on political matters. Aside from lack of political machinery[8], it may be that the relevant information is not widely disseminated, especially as regards to major political issues.

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or doubtful beliefs about the political programs and personal profile of many candidates, this may lead them to political apathy. Hence, voters in this category would have no inclination to know how to vote well. This problem of political apathy as brought about by the problem of knowledge is a deep and persistent problem that requires a sustained and separate treatment, something that considerations of space cannot permit me to undertake. In this paper, I simply assume that many voters have the strong desire to vote well in spite of their lack of knowledge and these people are willing to address this gap, thus precluding political apathy as a live option.

[7] Thomas Cristiano, *The Rule of the Many: Fundamental Issues in Democratic Theory* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1996), 105.

[8] I thank Cristine Pingal for pointing this out.

But even if relevant information is available, there remains another acute problem: public misinformation. There are many explanations for this but I would like to highlight one common explanation: the deliberate misinformation due to political propaganda. This becomes clearer when an election is about to come. The political arena transforms into a virtual coliseum in which political parties seek to discredit each other in the public's eye. Most of these propagandas are sleight and very carefully maneuvered that, without insider knowledge, they can be attributed to anyone at all. Herbert Tingsen described this eloquently:

> The nature of modern propaganda is indicated by the common assumption of the effectiveness of appeals to the emotions and to chance impulses. Arguments that seek to sway "second thoughts" are strengthened by the simultaneous use of such devices as pictures, music, songs, emblems, and demonstrations.[9]

Such messiness of the political sphere leaves the voter not only uninformed but misinformed. So given this chaotic picture of politics, how should one vote? Is it possible to provide a set of criteria for the most suitable political candidate in any given position?

This paper aims to provide a paradigm as to how voters can choose whose political candidate is worthy of the position. The paradigm is not new and may even appear commonsensical, and it is *political meritocracy*. Daniel A. Bell defines political meritocracy as "the idea that political power should be distributed in accordance with ability and virtue."[10] Since Bell's definition captures the two criteria that I want to introduce and defend, I shall follow his definition. This paradigm of political meritocracy is not meant to force people into choosing any *particular* candidate; it is the voter's ultimate prerogative. Forcing

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[9] Herbert Tingsen, *The Problem of Democracy* (New Jersey: The Bedminster Press, 1965), 102.

[10] Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 6.

or manipulating people into choosing a specific person or party is inimical to the democratic process that makes our country essentially democracy. However, without a clear guide of coming up with suitable political candidates, we are left with choosing simply based on affinity, familiarity or any arbitrary standard. To maximize the benefits of democracy, the ones who should be in position are those who are competent for the office that they are assigned. They should be sensitive to people's needs and embody in them the will of the people they govern. After all, they are supposed to represent the people who voted them. As such, the paradigm that I am to provide is not meant to coerce anyone; it is simply a guide based on people's basic intuitions to reach a defensible consensus. So what makes for a suitable political candidate?

Technical Competence

The first thing to bear in mind is that the political candidate should have *technical competence,* what Bell calls ability. This is competence in direct connection to the position the candidate is running. That is to say, we should all ask of a candidate: can the candidate do the job? Some suggestions are in order on how to spot whether a candidate possesses technical competence, although the list is certainly not exhaustive. For one, a candidate running to be a lawmaker should, of course, have the know-how in writing bills and passing laws. It would be a great advantage if the candidate is a lawyer since that implies that the candidate has a tested knowledge of the laws of the land. Being a lawyer entails knowledge of the present laws and consequently, knowledge on how to apply them to specific instances or develop them in light of current issues and concerns. Of course, this does not necessarily imply that nonlawyers are necessarily inferior to lawyers in the field of lawmaking. One may have knowledge of laws by some other means, for instance, through nonacademic legal exposure or working in a legal setting. But the point is, a good grasp of the land's laws is a clear indication that a candidate is likely to be competent in lawmaking. Thus, it is essential that a voter examines the intellectual background of relevant candidates.

On the executive level positions, a good grasp of the law remains an advantage. The candidate should know how to apply the laws and execute them in the land. Again, the fact that one has no legal background does not preclude one from turning out to be an effective executive public official. One tested way of knowing whether someone will turn out to be effective politically is through an examination of a candidate's leadership experience. Being a leader in his field usually translates into an effective political leader.[11] For although they may be different fields, the skill of leadership cuts across all borders. Similarly, those who are running for higher positions can be assessed as to competence by looking at their relevant political experiences. There is a reason why it is commonly advised that those who aspire for higher positions in government should start at the lower levels. The experience one gains in leading in the lower level, such as a barangay, affords one of greater ease in political dealings, a bigger network of important people, and an expansive view of his role if possibly elected, to name a few. Although everyone has to start from scratch, the one who has greater political experience has an edge over the one who has not, all else being equal. However, this component that is political experience has to be tempered with the other criteria to be fully effective since a candidate may have acquired political experience but remains insensitive to the needs of her people.

One component of technical competence is *a wide-ranging vision for the candidate's community and constituents*. A suitable political candidate should have a sense of how he plans to steer his community in a direction that would benefit his constituents; he should be an infectious visionary. The most common medium that shows a candidate's vision is through his platforms. However, many Filipinos are no longer moved by a candidate's platform due to the fact that, once put in position, many officials do not seem to care whether they fulfilled their said plans or not. Although this problem is acute before the era of the internet, there are now attempts to mitigate it. Conscientious citizens now utilize the

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[11] I shall use the male pronoun to refer to political candidates but this should not be taken to suggest that male candidates are necessarily better than their female counterparts. Similarly, I shall use the female pronoun to any person, voter or not, who is a non-candidate.

ubiquitous technologies available to check whether the platforms advanced during the campaign period are actually realized given the term. Social media makes it easy to examine discrepancies regarding what a candidate says he will do and what is actually done - if given the term. So there is a good reason now to give attention to a candidate's vision since we now have the capacity to follow through this vision from possibility to fruition. And we can hold accountable those voted in power once they fail to realize it, one way of which is to refrain from voting them if ever they run for a position again.

Another component of technical competence is a *deep awareness of political and social issues to be addressed.* A suitable candidate should have a good sense of important issues in the community. He should have a stand on social issues that burden or inconvenience the public. If a candidate runs without any background knowledge on relevant issues that confront his land, then this serves as a good reason not to vote for him. Malnutrition, poor housing, inadequate medical care, scanty education, and lack of employment opportunities are some of the major social issues that any democracy must address. The responsible elected public official must have clear and feasible answers to these. This is part of what makes an elected public official technically competent.

Also, to be technically competent, especially in the field of public service, an elected public official must have *a bias for action.* The search for this quality in Philippine politics is the result, in part, of the people being tired of promises in the form of platforms but never coming to life. Indeed, the vision and the awareness of issues are not enough to make one an effective political leader; he must also have the will and tenacity to start and carry his plans to completion. But how would the voter know if a candidate is action-oriented? One way is to see what the candidate has achieved in the past. Needless to say, this should not hinder new candidates to enter the political arena. But to establish technical competence in the position they desire, they should let the voters know what concrete achievements they have before or as they run into office. It is important that voters put emphasis on a candidate's willingness to take action, and should

be wary of those who are good in planning and thought but doubtful on taking concrete decisive actions.

This point about action is rather telling since there are political officials whose municipalities and provinces they govern have little improved since these officials started their term. It is quite mind-boggling how these officials stay in power when they have been in position for a long time but little to almost no progress has taken place in their land. Whatever the reasons for the lack of progress in such places, it is evident that these officials do not deserve the political position for which they were voted. To be a deserving public servant, one must have done the best one could to improve the well-being and life of one's constituents. To do less than that is a political and moral abomination.

After laying out some components of technical competence, we may now ask why it is important. Why should voters choose those candidates who exhibit technical competence? The same reason that an employer is supposed to hire someone: the required competency makes the candidate qualified. It would be a waste of people's tax money to put someone in office who turns out to be incompetent in doing the job. Working as a leader in government necessarily demands time, energy and intelligence. Political offices are created to represent the state and ultimately to reflect the will of the people. Incompetence should have no place in government, and anyone who does not live up to the demands of the position should be called upon to resign. An incompetence of one person may result to a peril to many others. In this regard, technical competence is a legitimate reason to raise the standard for government positions, especially the presidency. But since to advance such an idea would require a separate lengthy treatment, we can set that aside. Suffice it to say that another necessary component for what makes a suitable political candidate is technical competence.

Moral Integrity

But while it is necessary that technical competence of the candidate be considered in light of one's voting decision, it is not sufficient. It would be a terrible mistake to choose a competent

candidate who turns out to be morally callous. As such, technical competence should be coupled with *moral integrity*, what Bell calls virtue. Although moral integrity ordinarily understood refers to adherence to basic moral principles and consistency in following them, I am going to use the term in a broader sense than that, which is to include the state of being morally admirable by ethically reflective people. Just like technical competence, moral integrity has many manifestations, some of which I will enumerate and contextualize in our discussion of a suitable political candidate.

One component of moral integrity is *conscientious moral thinking.* This means that the candidate does not simply follow fads or trends but make an informed decision based on reflective examination of the relevant issues. Such candidate is governed by acceptable moral principles and not by personal interests or simply the interests of the few. Take for instance the issue of divorce and same-sex marriage in the country. Some groups are already calling on the government to legalize these in the Philippines. However, an elected public official with moral integrity does not simply jump on the bandwagon and attempt to pass them into laws just to get the attention of these people and hopefully later, their votes. A morally conscientious public official would examine the issue seriously, drawing on evidence as to what side of the debate would be more beneficial to society, and then makes a decision based on that evidence. Furthermore, he makes a decision based on conscience fortified by intense moral reflection, even if the decision turns out to be unpopular or politically incorrect.

In addition, a candidate who has moral integrity exhibits *genuine care for the well-being of the people.* In the messy world of politics, this characteristic is difficult to spot, especially because some of them can fake it without actually having it. One way to discover genuine care is to observe the candidate's actions rather than his words. If the candidate has served before, we may ask: what has this elected public official actually done to advance the well-being of the people? If the candidate is a newcomer, we may similarly ask what good has he done for his community. Is this candidate known for being a person of action, constantly in the

center of projects and advocacies aimed at a better society? How has or will this candidate advance the well-being and good of farmers, fishermen, children, minority groups, middle class and the poor? These are some of the guide questions to ask in looking for a candidate's genuine care for the people.

I admit that the qualities of conscientiousness and genuine care are difficult to ascertain in people since they are generally states of mind. Anyone may feign them in action, as the image of a traditional politician, shortened as *trapo*, who looks concerned and speaks emphatically about the people's lot without doing anything about it. However, there is one effective way of seeing whether a candidate possesses moral integrity, and it is that the candidate has no moral blemish attached to his name. He is not involved in any public scandal or issues of corruption. He has no bad record in public or any service. He is respected and his good reputation is well-known. As Laurence Stapleton said, "statesmen must have a track record of integrity."[12] Of course, a good reputation does not necessarily entail genuine moral integrity.[13] It might be the case that the politician can hide his tracks well so no blemish becomes attached to his name. While this is possible, this is certainly unlikely. A politician's reputation is his edge or his downfall. Given that any politician has his share of critics and enemies, any corrupt or immoral practices he has are likely to be revealed in the limelight, especially when candidates' reputations are at stake (such as during election time). Thus, while reputation is not a foolproof evidence for one's moral integrity, it is nevertheless an excellent gauge in determining the moral integrity of any politician.

Correspondingly, those who have a questionable character and image should make us pause in voting them. Stapleton suggests one vivid description of a public official who has questionable integrity: those who appeal "to the ignorance of their constituents, clowning their way with doughnut-dunking and 'pass the biscuit' antics'…". Stapleton concludes that this kind

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[12] Laurence Stapleton, *The Design of Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), 99.

[13] I thank an anonymous reviewer of this journal for pointing this out.

of politician "debase the function of a democratic legislator."[14] A candidate who resorts to vote buying is one definite way of appealing to the ignorance of one's constituents. It is against the law, so doing the act implies that the candidate forsakes the law to advance personal agenda. Worse, if the candidate uses money to manipulate the poor and the uneducated to vote for them, knowing that these people can easily be influenced by money. If these candidates can spend sacks of money to buy people's votes in exchange for a political office, the natural question then would be what is at stake with the position for someone to spend that much.

But why should moral integrity matter? This may be an obvious question to ask but it needs explaining. Political candidates are supposed to be representative of the will of the people. Their actions have a deep impact in the community. Elected public officials who have questionable moral integrity do not care so much about how they can improve their community or empower their constituents. They are likely to put their interests first, and sometimes even at the expense of the people. This only shows that they cannot genuinely represent the people since what they are after is only their interests and needs, and so, do not deserve to be voted into political positions. One might object that it seems that I am introducing a false dilemma between self-interest and moral integrity: is it not possible to care primarily about your own interest while also having moral integrity at the same time?[15] I think this objection can be addressed by bearing in mind the special role that a public official plays in society, and it is this: any public official is supposed to reflect the will and voice of the people so that a public official solely focused in his or her self-interest defeats that very important function. If a choice has to be made between one's interest and the good of the public, a self-interested candidate would no doubt choose his interest even if such choice means a gross neglect of the public's voice and needs. Correspondingly, if a voter has to choose between a candidate who exhibits technical competence but lacking in moral integrity as opposed to one who shows moral integrity but lacks technical competence, it is, as I shall shortly argue, more preferable to

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[14] Laurence Stapleton, *The Design of Democracy*, 105.
[15] I thank an anonymous reviewer of this journal for pointing this out.

choose the latter over the former. A candidate who is known for moral integrity is not likely to sacrifice the well-being and interests of the people for the sake of advancing political parties and personal interests. One can learn the trade of political leadership in time so long as one is willing and determined to learn. Somebody who is competent but morally callous is more like a mad genius than a genuine leader. History has shown that to give power to this kind of people result in terrible consequences that jeopardize even the lives of their own people. This scenario shows that possessing technical competence does not necessarily entail moral integrity. Similarly, a person with moral integrity does not necessarily imply that the person is up for the job.

However, given the complexity of political issues and people's preoccupation to make a living, expecting people to have sufficient knowledge of every political issue is just naïve. As Anthony Downs reminded, "attempts to become well-informed about politics are very costly due to the complexity of the issues. They require a lot of time and energy."[16] As such, it is expected that many of the members of the electorate would have little serious knowledge about politics. Downs suggested four common sources of political knowledge: popular media, jobs, opinion leaders, and friends interested in politics.[17] However, all these sources can be called into question about their objectivity and skills in critical thinking is essential in achieving that. For instance, popular media, such as TV and radio, are mostly owned by those financially powerful who have vested interests with political candidates. As Herbert Tingsen expressed, popular media is one of the most influential means to influence public opinion and these media are "largely owned by economically powerful groups which use the mass media to their own ends."[18] One may respond that the internet as the newest medium has the potential to inform the public about politics in ways that avoid the problems with the old media. Indeed, there are lots of potential for the internet, not the least of which is to take the role of a public sphere. However, there remains a number of problems,

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[16] Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 109.

[17] Ibid., 109-110.

[18] Herbert Tingsen, *The Problem of Democracy,* 112.

which are enumerated by the communications expert Zizi Papacharissi in her pioneering article that examines the possibility of the internet as a public sphere.[19] Some of these problems, among many others, include the notion that the internet magnifies instead of bridges cultural disparities and its tendency towards commercialization trumping over democratization. The three other sources mentioned by Tingsen are also beset with problems. Having a job that is directly connected to political candidates gives one a thorough knowledge of these candidates and their political offices. But this does not guarantee that the information one gets is completely unbiased. Since people who work for an elected public official are naturally expected to be on the side of that official, it is hard to be objective in such context. However, we should not underestimate the insider knowledge that one has in working in such offices. We may return to the paradigm in assessing the claims of these people regarding the officials for whom they are working, formulating questions that bring out reasons to think that the official in question is (or is not) technically competent and is (or is not) possessing of moral integrity.

In the case of opinion leaders, they may sound objective but they may also have hidden political interests; the same is the case with friends who are into politics. It is difficult to be objective about such matters as politics, so the more educated one becomes, the more one sounds objective and persuasive, even if they are in reality politically biased. Again, the paradigm of political meritocracy can be helpful in these situations. We may ask: does the person mention proofs of the candidate's technical competence? Is she able to show that a candidate possesses the needed competencies to serve in public office? In terms of moral integrity, it is important to bring out whether the candidate has a reputable image: do these sources show that the candidate has an unquestionable moral integrity? Indeed, the last question is just as important to ask about the sources themselves: are these opinion leaders and friends just as reliable as the candidates they are talking about? We need to remember that these people are

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[19] Zizi Papacharissi, "The Virtual Sphere: The Internet as a Public Sphere" in *The Information Society Reader,* ed. Frank Webster (New York: Routledge, 2004), 390.

able to articulate their political views in ways that sound persuasive and reasonable. While their view may indeed be rationally persuasive and reasonable, it is incumbent upon the voters to assess them in the most rational way, which is only possible through the paradigm of political meritocracy.

To sum up, the two essential components in choosing a political candidate are by assessing the candidate's technical competence and moral integrity. With this paradigm of political meritocracy, any voter would have a way of assessing whose political candidates are suitable for the position. In the next section, I shall concern myself with answering the question of how this paradigm can be inculcated into the minds of the electorate. To answer that question, we need to turn to education.

Education and the Electorate

Looking at our educational system, there is a focus largely on rote memorization and objective tests. Martha Nussbaum, a prominent philosopher of education, describes a more severe case in India in which "Socratic active learning and exploration through the arts have been rejected in favor of a pedagogy of force-feeding for standardized national examinations."[20] How long before this will happen in the Philippines? While learning technical skills are not totally objectionable, they are not geared towards educating people towards greater critical thinking and deep ethical reflection, which are important to the state of any democracy. Issues that require critical thinking and deep moral reflection can hardly be settled by a question with an objective answer; what is needed is a serious discussion of issues where every side can be heard, discussed and even criticized according to reason.

Critical thinking skills are invaluable in assessing the claims made by a political candidate. It is easy to be carried away by grand claims of a better life as usually promised by candidates. However, a critical thinking mind does not easily believe whatever is heard but looks for tangible evidence and rationally

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[20] Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 19.

acceptable reasons concerning the plausibility of the claim. Educating the electorate of critical thinking gives them the tools to properly weigh candidates' promises and platforms. However, critical thinking skills are impotent if the electorate does not possess enough background knowledge on social and political issues so that they may be able to formulate clearly their position. Philosophy educators then are in the ideal position to teach the background information regarding these issues in the context of teaching critical thinking. It is therefore unfortunate that logic as a subject has been removed in the college curriculum. Logic is the discipline whose main concern is reasoning, including identifying bad from good reasoning.[21] Logic teachers are expected to teach their students how to properly assess the validity and soundness of arguments, spot errors in reasoning and eventually how to formulate strong and persuasive arguments of their own. It is obvious how such valuable skills help in deciding whose political candidate to vote. As Martha Nussbaum rightfully argues, "education is not just about the passive assimilation of facts and cultural traditions, but about challenging the mind to become active, competent, and thoughtfully critical in a complex world."[22] A fully democratic education then involves forming students' minds to be thoughtfully critical of their political leaders, since these leaders constitute an essential component that makes up their political world.

The emphasis on critical thinking, especially concerning political decision-making, brings out the presupposition that the electorate has the duty to be reasonable about their voting decisions. We should not look at our voting power as an end in itself or a trophy that is its own reward but *only as a means* to build an effective government by electing the right, i.e., competent and virtuous, leaders. I do not see any reason for thinking that voting has an intrinsic value, aside from the instrumental value just mentioned. In fact, even if an intrinsic value for voting is

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[21] See the following: Graham Priest, *Logic: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1; Walter Sinnott-Armstrong & Robert Fogelin, *Understanding Arguments: An Introduction to Informal Logic* (United States: Wadsworth, 2010), xv.

[22] Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities,* 18.

unearthed, I do not see any reason how it will legitimize any unreasonableness in people's voting decisions. Suppose for instance that a particular society has discovered such intrinsic value in voting. However, the electorate in this hypothetical society has voted candidates who are corrupt, incompetent and, to a great extent, self-centered, resulting in the definite breakdown of their society. In this scenario, the intrinsic value of voting does nothing to compensate for the tragic results that arose from the public's voting decisions. The ultimate point is this: any intrinsic value that may be found in voting can never trump the power inherent in voting's instrumental value.[23]

An autonomous electorate who ends up with a corrupt and incompetent leadership shows that there is more to voting than just the exercise of a citizen's right; it is an act of responsibility which entails that the electorate should view their power to vote as a duty they owe to their community. Voting decisions should be informed, reasonable and free from arbitrary standards. There is no reason for the community of voters to not adhere to the most rational standard. Consequently, we are all accountable to everybody in the way we choose our candidates. The paradigm of political meritocracy provides every voter the framework to be as reasonable and conscientious as possible. To assess the reasons for choosing certain candidates over others, we should look for reasons that reflect the technical competence and moral integrity of the candidates. Other reasons that have nothing to do with those two are arbitrary and are thus irrational. Anthony Downs has eloquently expressed the value of reason to citizen's responsibility:

> Reasonableness ought to characterize citizens' view…Citizens ought to have reasons for preferring their view to others and not simply be driven by emotion in selecting conception of aims. They ought to be able to defend their views to themselves as well as to others.[24]

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[23] I thank an anonymous reviewer of this journal for asking me to clarify this point.

[24] Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy,* 124.

One might respond that the passage just mentioned supposes that reason and emotion are mutually exclusive when they need not always be so.[25] I agree: it is possible, in fact even frequent, to find someone who is filled with strong emotions while expressing a perfectly reasonable view. However, what makes such emotional views worthy of being taken seriously is not the colorful passions shown but the reasons behind the views. All else being equal, reasons determine whether emotions are in the end legitimate.

Aside from the teaching of critical thinking, another essential component in our educational system is the encouragement and practice of ethical reflection. This ideal coincides with the recent change in the college curriculum that now includes Ethics as a general education subject that is required of all courses. This, of course, is good news insofar as the aim of this paper is concerned. The college classroom can now be utilized to introduce college students to the thorny world of ethics so that they may have the tools to assess a candidate's stand on moral issues and weigh the validity and cogency of their moral reasoning. However, some qualifications are in order. The subject should not be taught in the same way that other technical subjects are taught, filled with formulas to memorize and concepts to play around. The learning of ethics should primarily engage people to reflect about their moral stand regarding issues that have moral significance. It should make them weigh the strengths and weaknesses of their moral convictions so that they may end up with strong and reasonable moral beliefs and principles. In this way, they will know how they should stand on a moral issue that comes up in the public square. They will be able to scrutinize the position of any candidate on major issues that have great moral implications. The exercise of moral reflection to be provided by the ethics class prepares the citizen to examine the moral integrity that a candidate may or may not exhibit.

However, one may notice that the success of the promotion of the paradigm lies greatly in the voters' chance to have a sustained study on ethics and critical thinking. It seems then that it is geared for the most part towards those who have the

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[25] I thank an anonymous reviewer of this journal for pointing this out.

opportunity of a formal education. But this leaves all the voters who have not reached that stage groping in the dark. While this last fact does not count as invalidating the truth of the paradigm, it shows how pervasive and thorny the problem of knowledge is. Nevertheless, as suggested earlier, the internet, among its many gifts, can help the unschooled in providing introductory resources for the learning of critical thinking and ethics. But, even if we assume that the internet has that power, this only pushes the problem further: what about those who have no access to the internet? In fact, what about those who indigenous people who are too illiterate that they can't even read and write? This I think provides a good reason to elevate the standard for voting right by excluding those who are illiterate. If the only rational way to vote is by the paradigm of political meritocracy, and this paradigm can only be followed by the ability to reason, then it follows that those who are illiterate would not have the capacity to weigh candidates based on technical competence and moral integrity, and so must not be given the right to vote.

One might object that the inference made is highly problematic, as it reduces the idea of reason to verbal and written reasoning: can illiterate people not be able to reason in their own way?[26] This is an interesting objection but one that I think can be adequately answered. Consider the fact that minors are not allowed to vote. The main rationale behind that is the reasonable assumption that minors are not mature and informed enough to make the act of voting. This is the same reason why the law punishes any person of legal age for engaging in a sexual act with a minor *even if the minor has consented* since the assumption is that any consent given by a minor does not constitute a perfectly reasonable and mature decision on the minor's part. So, if minors who are in many cases literate, educated and even politically informed, are not allowed to vote, then why should the illiterate people be? Given the controversial nature of the inference made and its logical validity arising from the political meritocracy paradigm, this is surely an argument worthy of further exploration and development.

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[26] I thank an anonymous reviewer of this journal for pointing this out.

While political meritocracy is almost too commonsensical to be even argued for, it is surprising that there is a scant philosophical literature primarily devoted to it.[27] One reason for this is I think the rise of identity politics, an idea that is in direct contrast to political meritocracy.[28] What political meritocracy ensures is that political candidates are voted into office on the basis of individual merit. They are not chosen "randomly, or by ascriptive characteristics such as race or gender, or by the machinations of the already powerful."[29] It is not hard to discern how this idea is threatened by the rise of identity politics. While political meritocracy is predicated on the idea of merit, identity politics sets aside merit in favor of one's particular identity as the basis of choice. So a particular candidate is chosen solely because of the candidate's gender or race or ethnicity; whether the candidate is qualified in the technical and moral sense as used here is out of the question. Identity politics presupposes the privileged position of being a person with particular identity—for instance, being a female or transgender or black---as giving one the unique access to express the experiences of these particular groups of people, a proposition that is relatively uncontroversial. However, the picture becomes complicated when this privileged access is somehow assumed to make a political candidate qualified for the position they are running for. It is clear that one's gender or race or ethnicity that does not necessarily entail technical competence or moral integrity. As such, identity politics is a clear threat or at least a misguided substitute for political meritocracy.

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[27] The only book-length philosophical treatment of the idea I have found is Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[28] In contrast to political meritocracy, the idea of identity politics has produced a voluminous number of books from many different prestigious presses. See for instance the following: Linda Martin Alcoff, Michael Hames-Garcia, Satya P. Mohanty, Paula M. L. Moya, eds., *Identity Politics Reconsidered* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Howard J. Wiarda, *Political Culture, Political Science, and Identity Politics: An Uneasy Alliance* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2014); Susan J. Hekman, *Private Selves, Public Identities: Reconsidering Identity Politics* (Pennsylvania, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004).

[29] David Miller, "Two Cheers for Meritocracy" in *Journal of Political Philosophy* 4:4 (1996), 277.

Ultimately, the responsibility is on each voter to engage the electorate in the critiquing of political views and moral convictions. This is what qualifies as an enlightened political discourse. The choice to vote a particular candidate or hold a political conviction should not be immune to criticisms that are based on good reasons and evidence. Any voter should be able to defend her choice in light of the questions and criticisms thrown at her. It should be clear, however, that the capacity to defend one's political choice is not the same as polemics.[30] It is one thing to be able to articulate one's reasons behind one's political choices while quite another to make an aggressive attack against anyone who opposes one's point of view. The paradigm of political meritocracy is geared towards giving the voter a framework for showing that her choice is rationally defensible. There is no question that a suitable political candidate should possess the technical competence and more importantly, moral integrity that will reflect the candidate's concern for the people. Without these two characteristics in a political candidate, there is no good reason to vote one over the other, or even to vote at all.

Conclusion

There is no doubt a problem of knowledge in a democracy, a problem which greatly undermines the benefits one is supposed to get in a democratic society. This problem becomes acute when a voter has to determine the right political candidate into office. But there are cases in which the electorate failed to elect a suitable political candidate. To respond to that problem the paradigm of political meritocracy is provided, elucidated and argued for. It is a paradigm which states that a political candidate is suitable if and only if he can show or has shown technical competence and moral integrity. Voters who cannot bring out evidence for these two characteristics in their preferred candidates deserve to be rationally criticized.

While political meritocracy is easily perceived as commonsensical, I brought out some of its implications that are clearly counter-intuitive. However, it is my contention that

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[30] I thank an anonymous reviewer of this journal for asking me to clarify the distinction.

anyone who finds political meritocracy to be reasonable must also come to accept these implications. Political meritocracy, for instance, entails that the illiterate should not vote, a claim that seems to go against democracy itself. Also, political meritocracy is antithetical to identity politics, a notion that is increasingly becoming popular and taken as axiomatic.

Formal education has a lot to contribute to the promotion of the political meritocracy paradigm. The learning of critical thinking and ethics provides voters the tools to assess the words and promises of candidates along with their moral convictions. The teaching of critical thinking and ethics can also provide the necessary background knowledge of the electorate about social and political issues. Aside from education, another major way in which the paradigm can be expressed is through enlightened political discourse wherein the electorate can discuss and argue among themselves about the rationality of their voting decisions using the paradigm. This kind of discourse is meant to inspire constant reflection on one's political choices and moral convictions. Every voter should have the right to express her political opinions but she should be ready to be questioned and criticized. This particular exchange of ideas in the political sphere should be encouraged, not censored. It shows that ours is indeed a democratic society where anyone is free to express one's ideas. In the end, voting is a right, but, more importantly, it is a responsibility where the voter must adhere to the rules of reason and evidence in order to bring about a better society.

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