

# *Democracy, Truth, and Epistemic Proceduralism*

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*The usual justifications of democracy attach central importance to fair decision-making procedures. However, it is being increasingly emphasized that it is necessary to address epistemic considerations to justify democracy and democratic authority. In her book *Democracy and Truth: The Conflict between Political and Epistemic Virtues*, Prijić-Samaržija defends the view which places emphasis on the necessity of epistemic justification of democracy. In this paper, I will discuss her criticism of epistemic proceduralism, which can be considered major contemporary framework for epistemic justification of democracy. Within the framework of epistemic proceduralism, for justifying democracy and democratic authority it is necessary to take into account both political and epistemic values. Nevertheless, Prijić-Samaržija thinks that epistemic proceduralism is not sufficiently epistemic and that it reduces epistemic to political values. I shall argue that epistemic proceduralism can be defended from this kind of criticism.*

**Keywords:** Democracy, truth, correctness, legitimacy, democratic authority, epistemic proceduralism.

## 1. *Introduction*

The usual justifications of democracy attach central importance to fair decision-making procedures. However, it is being increasingly emphasized that it is necessary to address epistemic considerations to justify democracy and democratic authority. In her book *Democracy and Truth: The Conflict between Political and Epistemic Virtues*, Prijić-Samaržija defends the view which places emphasis on the necessity of epistemic justification of democracy. In this paper, I will discuss her criticism of epistemic proceduralism, which can be considered major contemporary framework for epistemic justification of democracy. Within the framework of epistemic proceduralism, for justifying democracy and demo-

cratic authority it is necessary to take into account both political and epistemic values. Nevertheless, Prijić-Samaržija thinks that epistemic proceduralism is not sufficiently epistemic and that it reduces epistemic to political values. I shall argue that epistemic proceduralism can be defended from this kind of criticism.

The structure of this paper is as follows. In the second section, the distinction between proceduralist and epistemic justification of democracy is introduced. I also take into consideration certain distinctions within epistemic justification of democracy and present reasons underpinning Prijić-Samaržija's criticism of epistemic proceduralism. The third section explores the distinction made by Prijić-Samaržija between pure and moderate epistemic proceduralism. In this section I discuss her arguments against pure epistemic proceduralism. The fourth section of the paper examines her criticism of moderate epistemic proceduralism. In this regard, the role of truth in the framework of moderate epistemic proceduralism is particularly scrutinized. Section five concludes.

## 2.

I will start my analysis by introducing the distinction between political and epistemic values (Prijić-Samaržija interchangeably uses terms political and epistemic virtues). Basic political values include principles of fairness, primarily freedom and equality. It is less clear what should be included among basic epistemic values relevant for the political domain. In any case, Prijić-Samaržija conceives of epistemic values as a broad set of values that include truth, correctness, problem-solving, epistemic responsibility (Prijić-Samaržija 2018: 117). In her book *Democracy and Truth: The Conflict between Political and Epistemic Virtues*, Prijić-Samaržija examines the significance of political and epistemic values for justification of democracy. We usually refer to political values of freedom and equality when we want to answer the question what makes a political decision-making procedure fair. Obviously, in that respect democracy has advantages over non-democratic decision-making procedures since it treats all participants in a fair way.

In sharp contrast to this, epistemic values in the political domain do not necessarily have to favor democracy. Ever since Plato it has been claimed that epistemic considerations suggest that the most desirable way of political decision-making is the rule of those who know best, which implies the rule of a few. However, this form of rule can be rejected because it does not treat all members of society fairly when deciding about political issues (Estlund 2008: 35–36). So, it can be concluded that democracy is the most desirable way of decision-making. However, that raises an additional question whether democracy itself adds to the quality or correctness of political decision-making. Once importance of epistemic values in the political domain is recognized, it becomes necessary to answer the question whether a democratic way

of decision-making matters not only due to procedural fairness, but also due to certain epistemic values. If it would prove impossible to furnish such an answer, epistemic values could always be evoked when someone wants to criticize democracy. The most recent justifications of democracy therefore consider it necessary to demonstrate that democracy encapsulates both political and epistemic values.

In addition to the distinction between political and epistemic values, there is a related distinction between proceduralist and epistemic justification of democracy. Proponents of proceduralist justification of democracy maintain that freedom and equality should be understood as purely procedural values. If they are conceived of as procedure-independent values, then such justifications of democracy may favor setting limits on democratic decision-making procedures (Dahl 1989: 169–170). The obvious problem for proceduralist justification of democracy is that it does not provide any criterion for distinguishing between good and bad outcomes of democratic decision-making. In this view, legitimacy of democratic decision-making is guaranteed by the very fairness of the procedure. However, bad decisions can be brought as an outcome of fair procedures. Proponents of epistemic justification of democracy therefore maintain that epistemic criteria must be taken into account in order to assess outcomes of democratic decision-making. Those espousing epistemic justification of democracy however disagree among themselves whether such epistemic criteria should be a part of the procedure of democratic decision-making or should be understood as standards of correctness that are independent of the procedure. In any case, proponents of epistemic justification think that in addition to political values, justification of democracy must necessarily include some epistemic standards, regardless whether they are understood as inherent to the procedure of democratic decision-making or independent of it (which of course does not preclude the possibility of making both types of standards a part of justification).

Prijić-Samaržija propounds epistemic justification of democracy that takes into account both political and epistemic values. She calls this a hybrid justification of democracy, because it strives to balance both kinds of values. Obviously, aforementioned types of epistemic justification of democracy, which include types of epistemic proceduralism, can also be considered hybrid because they strive to balance political and epistemic values. However, despite that, Prijić-Samaržija maintains that in various types of epistemic proceduralism epistemic values are reduced to political values. She says “that they failed to offer a hybrid stance *at all* because epistemic justification was immediately either dismissed as secondary or downright sacrificed in favor of the political and ethical” (Prijić-Samaržija 2018: 145). By contrast, she argues that epistemic values should not be reduced to political values (Prijić-Samaržija 2018: 14). Instead, one should strive to find a model of justifying democracy which to the greatest possible extent will lead to

true beliefs and correct decisions. Prijić-Samaržija therefore holds that since it insufficiently takes into account the epistemic value of truth, neither type of epistemic proceduralism is adequate enough for epistemic justification of democracy. In the following two sections, I will examine more closely her criticism of epistemic proceduralism.

### 3.

Prijić-Samaržija makes a distinction between two types of epistemic proceduralism which she terms pure epistemic proceduralism and moderate epistemic proceduralism (Prijić-Samaržija 2018: 122). Even though her analysis takes into consideration pure epistemic proceduralism first, it should be pointed out that this position, defended by Fabienne Peter, had actually emerged as a criticism of the standard version of epistemic proceduralism espoused by David Estlund (and which Prijić-Samaržija qualifies as moderate epistemic proceduralism). Namely, Estlund has offered arguments in favor of epistemic proceduralism as the most adequate theoretical framework for justification of democracy and democratic authority. According to Estlund's conception of epistemic proceduralism, this type of normative justification has an advantage over alternative proceduralist and epistemic ways of justifying democracy. Unlike fair proceduralism, epistemic proceduralism takes into account procedure-independent standards of correctness. Estlund holds that this is necessary in order to be able to make any kind of difference between better and worse outcomes (Estlund 1997: 179). There must be some standards of correctness on the basis of which outcomes of decision-making procedure can be assessed. However, Estlund claims that epistemic proceduralism offers more adequate justification of democracy and its authority than classical epistemic justifications that he calls correctness theories (Estlund 2008: 102). According to correctness theory, a classical proponent of which was Rousseau, not only that a procedure-independent standard of correctness should be taken into account, but the decision-making procedure must be a fully reliable device for its realization. Rousseau therefore considered majority rule one such device so that those who find themselves in a minority after voting, have an obligation to act in accordance with the voting outcome, since it has been shown that their standpoint was wrong.

Estlund argues that correctness theory is too demanding for the purpose of justifying democracy and especially for justifying democratic authority (Estlund 2008: 104). He thinks that the standpoint of epistemic proceduralism offers a better alternative, because it can provide justification of democracy and its authority without recourse to requirements that are so demanding. Namely, if the fair procedure has a general tendency to lead to correct outcomes, this can be sufficient for justifying democratic authority. Therefore, to justify democracy and its authority, it is no longer necessary that the procedure should be a fully

reliable device for realizing or advancing procedure-independent standards of correctness; instead, it should be reliable enough to generally have a tendency to lead to their realization. This is what sets epistemic proceduralism apart from correctness theories, even though both theories recognize the significance of procedure-independent standards. Fabienne Peter criticized Estlund's version of epistemic proceduralism because she thinks that procedure-independent criteria are not necessary for epistemic justification of democracy (Peter 2007: 343). Namely, according to the standpoint of pure epistemic proceduralism, epistemic quality can ensue from very decision-making procedures that treats all participants fairly. Unlike fair proceduralism, the significance of epistemic values is recognized, but unlike Estlund's epistemic proceduralism, this conception drops procedure-independent standards of correctness. In the rest of this section, I will take into consideration arguments which Prijić-Samaržija furnishes against pure epistemic proceduralism. In the following section, I will discuss her criticism of moderate epistemic proceduralism.

According to the standpoint of pure epistemic proceduralism, fair access to the process of democratic decision-making can lead to correct outcomes due to inclusiveness and diversity. Although prejudices and wrong convictions people hold might find their way into the process of democratic decision-making, Peter thinks that they can be filtered through the process of discussion with other people. Obviously, pure epistemic proceduralism would require a procedure of public deliberation as a necessary condition in order to arrive at correct decisions. The assumption is that in the process of public deliberation, wrong beliefs could be rectified and many prejudices and biases exposed. Peter therefore holds that in a fairly organized public deliberation, some obviously incorrect proposals would not be able to hold their ground and go through (Peter 2007: 346). The basic idea is that due to inclusiveness of a fair procedure, such attitudes would encounter justified criticism. Fair procedures, according to the standpoint of pure epistemic proceduralism, can lead to realization of the difference between correct and incorrect outcomes. Precisely because of that, fair procedures can lead to outcomes that are correct.

Two main strands of criticism of pure epistemic proceduralism offered by Prijić-Samaržija are the following. First, she claims that pure epistemic proceduralism in effect reduces epistemic values to political values. She holds that epistemic values, even though their significance is recognized, are derived from political values. Prijić-Samaržija says that "pure epistemic proceduralism is not sustainable because it leaves the realm of epistemic assessments and reduces the epistemic justification of democracy to the political" (Prijić-Samaržija 2018: 131). According to Prijić-Samaržija, the role of procedure-independent epistemic values is necessary in order to provide epistemic justification of democracy. Given that pure epistemic proceduralism does not recognize any

procedure-independent epistemic value, Prijić-Samaržija concludes that the main problem with this standpoint is that it is not epistemic enough.

Second, she argues that the expectation that fair procedure of public deliberation will lead to correct outcome is overly optimistic. She draws attention to well-known facts regarding voter ignorance and lack of motivation to be informed about political issues, insisting that this should be taken into account when assessing epistemic contribution of public deliberation.<sup>1</sup> When in addition to these facts, the evidence about the difficulties in disseminating knowledge of more informed persons within deliberative groups are also taken into account, Prijić-Samaržija arrives to the conclusion that it is more appropriate to hold pessimistic expectations regarding the possibility that public deliberation would lead towards correct outcomes (Prijić-Samaržija 2018: 132–133). A related issue is that pure epistemic proceduralism does not offer any threshold for ascertaining whether public deliberation possesses an epistemic quality (Prijić-Samaržija 2018: 133). Prijić-Samaržija claims that this further corroborates her conclusion that pure epistemic proceduralism is not epistemic enough.

Regarding the second argument against pure epistemic proceduralism, it can be pointed out that findings about voter ignorance mostly pertain to existing democratic societies that do not function according to the principles of deliberative democracy, but primarily according to the majority rule.<sup>2</sup> The fact that this particular model of democracy does not motivate voters to become more informed, does not necessarily mean that they would remain equally uninformed had they had a possibility to engage in public deliberation to a greater extent. So, it seems that broadening the domain for public discussion within existing democracies could contribute to being more informed and thus to greater epistemic quality of the democratic process. The facts about voter ignorance thus do not necessarily lead towards a pessimistic conclusion about epistemic expectations from deliberative democracy.

If the first criticism that pure epistemic proceduralism reduces epistemic to political values is right, then the standpoint of pure epistemic proceduralism must be reduced to the standpoint of fair proceduralism. It is clear that fair proceduralism, which is based exclusively on political values, is not the same as pure epistemic proceduralism that is primarily interested in epistemic quality of fair procedures. Therefore, argument that leads to the conclusion that the standpoint of pure epistemic proceduralism is not epistemic enough does not necessarily show that in pure epistemic proceduralism epistemic values have been reduced to political values. The fact that epistemic values of fair pro-

<sup>1</sup> On this point, see also Ahlstrom-Vij 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Obviously, public discussion is not excluded, but seems insufficient from the perspective of deliberative democracy which emphasizes crucial importance of public deliberation for democratic legitimacy (Cohen 1997).

cedures are examined underlines that they hold significance for epistemic justification of democracy, which indicates that pure epistemic proceduralism should be distinguished from fair proceduralism. Pure epistemic proceduralism might not be epistemic enough, but in any case, unlike fair proceduralism, it recognizes the significance of epistemic values for justification of democracy.

#### 4.

Having discussed pure epistemic proceduralism, I now turn to Prijić-Samaržija's criticism of moderate epistemic proceduralism. As we have already seen, Estlund's version of epistemic proceduralism is referred to in her work as moderate epistemic proceduralism. Prijić-Samaržija argues that despite the fact that moderate epistemic proceduralism has certain advantages over pure epistemic proceduralism, this standpoint is still not epistemic enough. That in contrast to pure epistemic proceduralism, procedure-independent epistemic values are taken into account when justifying democracy, in her view, constitutes an obvious advantage of moderate epistemic proceduralism. It is worth reiterating that for Estlund's version of epistemic proceduralism both procedure-independent standards of correctness and epistemic properties of fair democratic decision-making procedures are important for justification of democracy and democratic authority.

However, Prijić-Samaržija holds that there is ambiguity concerning whether moderate epistemic proceduralism should be viewed as something which is proximate to correctness theories or whether it is a kind of a dualism of independent and purely procedural epistemic standards (Prijić-Samaržija 2018: 140). Prijić-Samaržija argues that in the light of significance attached to procedure-independent epistemic values, moderate epistemic proceduralism can be said to resemble correctness theories. But, given that equal importance is attached to fair procedures of democratic decision-making with some inherent epistemic characteristics, moderate epistemic proceduralism, according to Prijić-Samaržija, is rather akin to a kind of dualism of independent and purely procedural epistemic standards. If the first interpretation which reduces epistemic proceduralism to correctness theories is rejected (given that Estlund explicitly distances his position from correctness theories), only the interpretation of epistemic proceduralism as a dualistic position remains. The problem, according to Prijić-Samaržija, is that such a position is unstable since it cannot be seen how procedure-independent and procedural values can be balanced, since epistemic proceduralism, unlike correctness theories, does not maintain that correctness of outcomes is a necessary and sufficient condition for legitimacy of democratic decision-making.

Her main argument against moderate epistemic proceduralism starts from the assumption that "the result of a good democratic procedure will be epistemically legitimate even if it is incorrect and a de-

cision made in a democratic debate will have epistemic value even if it is untrue” (Prijić-Samaržija 2018: 140). The basic point is therefore the following. If moderate epistemic proceduralism allows legitimacy of democratic decision-making even in the case of incorrect decisions, then correctness theories that do not allow this, from an epistemic point of view, are more adequate for epistemic justification of democracy. Furthermore, according to Prijić-Samaržija, moderate epistemic proceduralism proves to be an unstable position because in a case when an incorrect decision should be obeyed, the source thereof would lie solely in a decision-making procedure. Thus, moderate epistemic proceduralism is an unstable dualistic position that in justification of democracy adduces either procedure-independent standards of correctness or fair decision-making procedures. Moreover, considering importance attached to fair procedures, Prijić-Samaržija concludes that despite the starting premises of moderate epistemic proceduralism, epistemic values also become reduced to political values (Prijić-Samaržija 2018: 145).

First, it should be noticed that when the possibility of incorrect outcomes is allowed within epistemic proceduralism, it does not mean that such possibility should be seen as a benchmark for the epistemic significance of procedures. Epistemically relevant benchmark for assessing decision-making procedures within epistemic proceduralism is that they generally have a tendency to lead towards correct outcomes. If this is the case, such procedures have epistemic value despite the fact that in some of their instantiations outcomes might not be correct. Therefore, the possibility of an incorrect outcome is not a relevant benchmark for assessing the standpoint of epistemic proceduralism; rather, it is that procedures have a tendency to lead towards correct outcomes.

Second, as I have already pointed out, unlike correctness theories which require fully reliable procedures, epistemic proceduralism requires that procedures should be reliable enough. Unlike pure epistemic proceduralism which does not furnish any threshold for epistemic values, Estlund points out that this threshold is that outcomes of democratic procedures should be better than random. Estlund’s argument substantiating this proposal is based on his criticism of fair proceduralism. Namely, it refers to the flipping a coin argument (Estlund 2008: 6). Voting is one fair procedure, but flipping a coin is one too. If we consider making decisions in a democratic way more significant than making decisions by flipping a coin, than it means that in order to justify procedures of democratic decision-making, they must be better than random.

Finally, Estlund thinks that epistemic proceduralism is more adequate than correctness theories for justifying democratic authority because in order to create political obligations, it is not necessary that a decision-making procedure lead to correct outcome in every single instance. It is sufficient that a decision-making procedure should have a tendency to lead towards correct outcomes. Therefore, for the creation

of political obligations, it is not required, as in correctness theories, that those who have found themselves in a minority should consider their decision wrong. Unlike correctness theories, epistemic proceduralism envisages that people would accept obligations that derive from a decision-making procedure which has a general tendency to lead towards correct outcomes, even when they disagree with a particular decision and consider it wrong in the given instance. So, it can be concluded that epistemic proceduralism provides better foundation for justifying democracy and its authority than correctness theories which on epistemic grounds do not allow for a possibility of disagreement and any wrong decisions. In that respect, epistemic proceduralism is indeed a moderate epistemic position, because it drops overly demanding requirements of correctness theories. This can be considered its advantage rather than its disadvantage, at least when epistemic justification of democracy and its authority are concerned.

These are the reasons why (moderate) epistemic proceduralism differs from correctness theories and why it cannot be considered to harbour a kind of dualism of epistemic values. Prijić-Samaržija correctly notes that it is not easy to see what the role of truth might be in the framework of epistemic proceduralism (Prijić-Samaržija 2018: 141). In this regard, she says that “Eslund’s dualism of epistemic and political values is problematic because he seems to claim that the epistemic value of democratic procedure simultaneously is and isn’t related to truth” (Prijić-Samaržija 2018: 142). So, it is necessary to determine more precisely the role of truth in the framework of Estlund’s epistemic proceduralism.

First, one should bear in mind that Estlund proposes a process of justifying democracy in two steps.<sup>3</sup> In the first step, from the perspective of reasonable persons or qualified points of view, non-democratic forms of decision-making are rejected because they do not pass the test of reasonable acceptance. This includes epistocracy or the rule of experts. Given that only democratic procedure remain in the game, in the second step of justifying democracy and democratic authority, the question is raised which democratic decision-making procedure is the most adequate in epistemic terms, that is, which democratic decision-making procedure is better than random and reliable enough to realize or advance certain procedure-independent standards of correctness. Estlund also thinks that public deliberation to a greater extent than other decision-making procedures, can be expected to satisfy these requirements.

Second, it should be noted that procedure-independent standards of correctness to which Estlund refers are not necessarily considered to have to be true. Namely, some criteria that can be an object of rea-

<sup>3</sup> This process is even more complex since it also includes the device of normative consent. For the purpose of explaining Estlund’s epistemic proceduralism, it is however sufficient to stick to the first two steps.

reasonable acceptance should not be required to be true, because such a requirement would be too demanding. From the perspective of reasonable persons or qualified points of view, such criteria can be acceptable despite the fact that they do not embody the whole truth as it is seen from the perspective of reasonable comprehensive doctrines. Insisting on entire truth as seen from the perspective of reasonable comprehensive doctrines would preclude reaching any kind of agreement. Therefore, it is more adequate to say that standards of correctness should be acceptable to all reasonable persons, rather than they should be true. This, however, does not mean that some procedure-independent standards cannot be considered true, at least in the minimal sense. Estlund says that “a statement “ $x$  is  $F$ ” is true in at least minimal sense if and only if  $x$  is indeed  $F$ ” (Estlund 2008: 25).

It is reasonable to suppose that what Estlund terms “primary bads” such as war, famine, economic collapse, genocide, belong to this class of procedure-independent standards (Estlund 2008: 163). Regardless of various reasonable comprehensive doctrines that they espouse, reasonable persons could consider it true that they are bads that should be avoided. I point out that all of this pertains to the first step of justification of democracy. In the second step, the question is raised which democratic decision-making procedure can be reliable enough (i.e. better than random) in order to realize procedure-independent standards of correctness or avoid primary bads (if they are taken as procedure-independent standards). The only reason why it could be said that democratic decision-making procedure in Estlund’s version of epistemic proceduralism is unrelated to truth is that he does not claim that procedure-independent standards necessarily have to be true. However, this does not preclude the possibility that in non-controversial cases, reasonable citizens could consider them to be true (as in the case of primary bads). In both cases, however, in the second step, a democratic decision-making procedure is related to a procedure-independent standard of correctness, regardless whether it is considered true or acceptable to reasonable persons.

Third, it seems that Prijić-Samaržija’s criticism presupposes that truth for Estlund is a fundamental epistemic value or procedure-independent standard. However, as we have seen, epistemic proceduralism has a much broader view on procedure-independent standards of correctness. Whatever criteria might be the case in point, what is relevant for justification of democratic decision-making is not to arrive to true beliefs, but to outcomes that realize or advance some procedure-independent standards of correctness (or avoid them if these standards are primary bads). Obviously, some political values will usually be considered procedure-independent standards of correctness. But this does not entail the reduction of epistemic to political values, because these values are considered in such a way as to yield an epistemic significance which is independent of the democratic decision-making procedure.

Here it would be helpful to draw attention to a distinction between theoretical and practical authorities. Theoretical authorities give us reasons for belief, while practical authorities give us reasons for action (Raz 1986: 29). When justification of democracy and especially democratic authority is concerned, what is important is not that a democratic decision-making procedure should lead to outcome which give us a reason for belief, but a reason for action. Consequently, for justification of democracy and democratic authority, it is not necessary that truth be the only relevant epistemic standard. It is more reasonable to assume that for justification of democracy, some other procedure-independent standards should have their epistemic significance and that democratic decision-making given its inherently epistemic characteristics should provide reasons for action or reasons to comply (Estlund 2008: 106).<sup>4</sup> Precisely because these procedural and procedure-independent standards have an epistemic significance, it cannot be said that in the framework of epistemic proceduralism, epistemic values are reduced to political values.

## 5. Conclusion

Prijić-Samaržija's main objection to epistemic proceduralism is that this position is too procedural for the purpose of epistemic justification of democracy. We have seen that pure epistemic proceduralism does not require any epistemic threshold regarding democratic decision-making procedure. By contrast, moderate epistemic proceduralism sets a threshold that the procedure should be better than random. Obviously, Prijić-Samaržija thinks that this is also not sufficient and that justification of democracy requires fully reliable procedures that will lead to truth. But it is doubtful whether such a demanding epistemic criteria are necessary for justification of democracy and democratic authority. These criteria seem too demanding if we take into account that conception of epistemic proceduralism can be sufficient for justifying democracy and its authority.

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, within certain limits. My aim here however is not to discuss the limits of political obligation, but its sources.

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