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Democracy or Epismocracy?



Photo by Jose M

Democracy refers to a government in which people rule directly or through their elected representatives. It is, in other words, what President Lincoln referred to in his Gettysburg address as a government “of the people, by the people, and for the people” but which Plato warned is a chimera.

Indeed, the ancient Greek philosopher thought a government elected by the people would end up being ruled by populists who, in the words of the Encyclopedia Britannica, “claim to embody the will of the people in order to consolidate their own power.” Therefore, he called for governments of the people and for the people but by individuals termed *philosopher kings* who would be singled out at a young age for their curiosity, intelligence, and desire to

promote everyone's wellbeing and then given an education that would provide them with the skills to do just that.

Lincoln, however, thought everyone should receive a high-quality education. That is the reason in his first political announcement he called education the most important subject which we as a people can be engaged in and then as President signed the Morrill Act of 1862 to assure that education would be available to all social classes. Indeed, throughout his career Lincoln echoed the view of Horace Mann that the purpose of education:

“is to inspire the love of truth as the supremist good, and to clarify the vision of the intellect to discern it. We want a generation ... above deciding great and eternal principles upon narrow and selfish grounds. Our advanced state of civilization has evolved many complicated questions respecting social duties. We want a generation...capable taking up these complex questions, and of turning all sides of them towards the sun.”

We too share that view.

Clearly the more highly educated voters are the more likely they are to elect officials (including most importantly a President) that have the ability and desire to make decisions in their best interest. Hence, it is not surprising that, given the highly unequal way wealth and income are distributed in our country today, we tend to end up with a government of the people, by the wealthy, and for the wealthy. Why? Because as Emmanuel Saez and other economists pointed out, children of high-income earners and the wealthy are “77 times more likely to attend an elite school than those with parents in the bottom 20 quintile.”

How do we deal with that problem? The answer Saez along with the Nobel Prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz, Thomas Piketty and many others give is “by imposing higher taxes on wealth and income.” But inequality in the distribution of wealth and income leading to educational differences and other inequities is not the only reason our democracy fails. Another reason is it has yet to devise a method of providing voters with reliable information about the qualifications of those running for office, in particular and most importantly, the highest office in the land.

Hence, to deal with the latter problem we propose that to have their names placed on the ballot for President, candidates be required to take a four-part written exam crafted by academics from left to right across the political spectrum and then have their results on the exam made public.

The first part of the exam would test candidates' ability to acquire, retain, and process information or what is referred to as their cognitive ability. The second part would test their

knowledge of history, economics, natural science, statistics, and other subjects. The third part would test their stance on major issues of concern to voters such as climate change, Israel's incursion into Gaza, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, abortion, immigration, health care, and LGBTQ and women's rights. Finally, the fourth part would address ethical issues.

A question on the ethical portion of the exam, for example, might ask: "Is it fair to give more weight to the views of individuals who contribute financially to your campaign than to others?" And another might ask: "can you describe an ethical dilemma you faced in the past and how you dealt with it?"

What questions might the results of the exam help voters answer today? A recent justice department report claimed President Joe Biden's memory was "extremely limited." In response, Biden asserted that his memory "is fine." How much weight should voters give to each of these points of view. Biden's answers to the questions posed in the first part of the exam would help them determine the answer.

Furthermore, after it was pointed out that his statements about immigrants "poisoning the blood of our country" were reminiscent of Adolph Hitler's view that "all great cultures of the past perished only because the originally creative race died out from blood poisoning" Donald Trump claimed he knew nothing about Hitler. Results from the second part of the exam would indicate just how knowledgeable he and other candidates are of important historical events and hence how capable they would be to use lessons from those events to guide their decisions.

Additionally, Trump claims he is "a very stable genius," while Niki Haley has characterized him as anything but. Whose point of view deserves more credence? The results of the Presidential Aptitude Examination would help voters determine the answer. And as a last example, both Biden and Trump have promised to reduce government malfeasance. How likely is it that they would do so? Their answers to the ethical questions on the exam would help provide voters with an answer to that question too.

In conclusion, for governments of the people to end up promoting the peoples' welfare they need to be headed by educated, conscientious, and skillful individuals bent on doing just that. In such governments political power would be distributed in proportion to knowledge and competence. Hence, they would be what Jason Brennan refers to in his book *Against Democracy* as an *epistocracy*. But to get from a democracy to an epistocracy requires two steps.

First, as the Harvard scholar E.O. Wilson suggested in his book titled Consilience, we need to provide all voters with a first-class education that addresses ethical issues as well as issues in

the hard sciences, social sciences, history, mathematics, and humanities. Then to end up with a government of, by, and for a well-educated socially conscious people or what might be termed an *epismocracy*, we need to make information about the views and abilities of candidates for President and other elective offices (such as the information that might be provided by the Presidential Aptitude exam we propose) readily available.

Paul Cantor and Roger Sparks are board members of the [Kemper Human Rights Education Foundation](#) board members.

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