



DEMOCRACY AND KNOWLEDGE

Åsa Wikforss
Department of Philosophy
Stockholm University

The strength of democracy

Democracies tend to **produce outcomes that people value**:

- avoid calamities (such as famines and wars)
- enhance human well-being along several dimensions: health, life expectancy, equality, happiness, etc.
- provide better protections for the environment
- better at dealing with crises (such as a pandemic)

V-Dem Institute, Report 2022, *Case for Democracy*. University of Gothenburgh.

Democratic reason

The **epistemic argument for democracy**: A system uniquely able to make knowledge based decisions and solve societal problems.

Basic mechanisms:

- **Collective intelligence** – pooling of knowledge across society through voting
- **Public deliberations** – debates driven by arguments aimed at the common good

Autocracy and truth



War is Peace

Freedom is Slavery

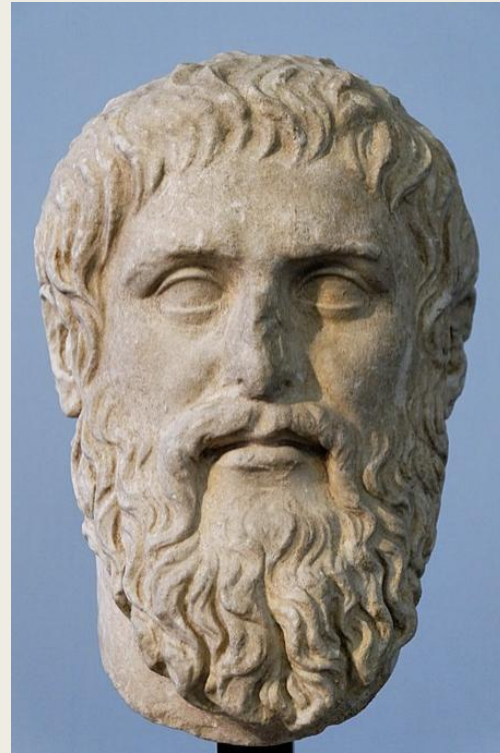
Ignorance is Strength

Open Society Barometer 2023

- Age 18-35: Only **53% thought democracy was preferable** to any other system (compared to 71% for those over 56)
- 42% of younger people **supportive of military rule** (29% in the US and France...)

The vulnerability of democracy

The dangers of demagoguery
– voter ignorance leads to tyranny



The “truth crisis”

- **High-choice** information environment: individual abilities and motivations become more important
- This has **effected people’s trust** and **use of established news media**
- Increased amount of **false and misleading information**, primarily as an effect of the lack of gatekeepers.

Epistemic cynicism

Corrosive falsehoods: Attacks on professional journalism and science

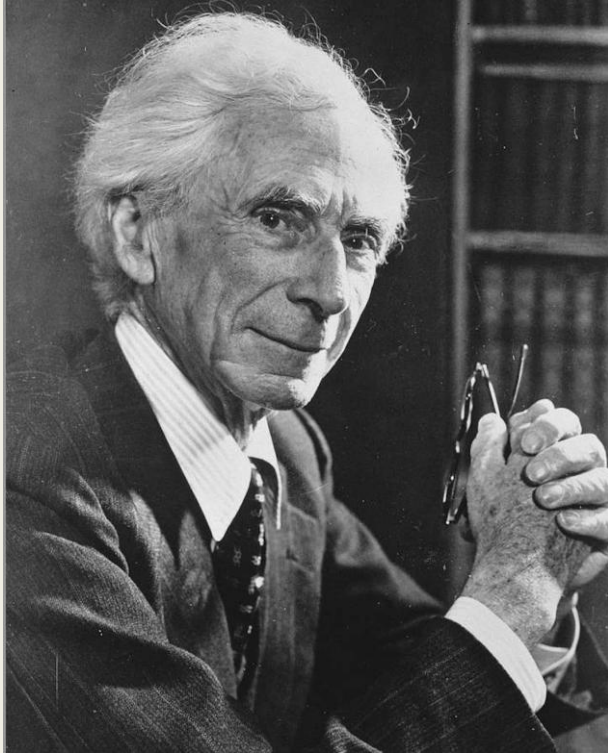
- Undermine trust in sources of higher quality
- Causes hostility to processes with higher epistemic demands
- Promotes belief that it is fruitless to seek truth



The knowledge shield

- Knowledge about the **nature and value of democracy**
- Knowledge about the **dangers of the new information environment**
- Knowledge about what **characterizes reliable sources**
- Strong basic knowledge about **society and its history....**

Tolerance



”The thing, above all, that a teacher should endeavor to produce in his pupils, if democracy is to survive, is the kind of tolerance that springs from an endeavor to understand those who are different from ourselves.”

Bertrand Russell, *Unpopular Essays*, 1950