

EPISTOCRACY AND MERITOCRACY AS EFFICIENT WAYS TO GOVERN SMALL ORGANIZATIONS

Вінницький національний технічний університет

Анотація: У цій статті досліджуються епістократична та меритократична ідея керування організаціями, наводиться визначення ідеологій, наводиться суб'єктивна оцінка переваг та недоліків даних моделей, надаються гіпотетичні приклади реалізації ідей

Ключові слова: епістократія, меритократія, ідеологія, філософія, керування, політологія.

Abstract: This article examines the epistocratic and meritocratic ideas of governing organizations. It provides definitions of these ideologies and offers a subjective evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of these models, provides hypothetical examples of implementing these ideas.

Keywords: epistocracy, meritocracy, ideology, philosophy, governance, political competence.

INTRODUCTION

In the modern world, society faces numerous complex social, political, and economic challenges that directly affect the effectiveness of governance both at the level of states and within individual organizations. One of the significant issues of contemporary society is the spread of individualism, when people tend to focus primarily on their own interests and personal problems rather than on common societal needs and collective goals. Such a tendency can reduce the level of responsibility for shared decisions and complicate the process of making effective managerial decisions.

In addition, the modern world is experiencing periods of political instability, crises, and military conflicts, which create additional challenges for governance systems. Political crises are often accompanied by a decline in public trust toward institutions, difficulties in making balanced decisions, and increasing social tension. Military actions, in turn, influence not only the political and economic situation of states but also change governance priorities, requiring fast, well-reasoned, and strategically sound decisions.

Under such conditions, the search for new approaches to governance becomes especially important, particularly those that could ensure more rational, competent, and efficient decision-making processes. That is why in the modern world there is a need for effective and rational solutions, which can be provided by epistocratic and meritocratic models of governance.

THE DEFINITION OF EPISTOCRACY AND MERITOCRACY

Epistocracy is a form of governance in which political power is distributed according to competence or expertise, rather than through equal universal suffrage. Its central principle is “rule by the knowledgeable,” meaning that individuals deemed more knowledgeable or capable hold greater political authority than those considered less so [1]. The philosophical roots of this idea can be traced to Plato's Republic, in which he divided society into three main classes: rulers – philosophers tasked with governing; guardians – warriors responsible for defending the state and maintaining order; and producers – farmers, artisans, and laborers who sustain society [2].

Plato's vision of epistocracy was inherently authoritarian, as the “knowledgeable” rulers were expected to essentially govern themselves, concentrating political power within a small elite. In the modern context, such concentration could easily devolve into dictatorship. Historical examples show that systems concentrating political power in a limited group have indeed emerged. In 1923, Italy's National Fascist Party, led by Benito Mussolini, passed the Acerbo Law, which granted two-thirds of parliamentary seats to any party or coalition receiving at least 25% of the votes. While not explicitly inspired by Plato, this law demonstrated how political structures can be designed to centralize power [3].

Nowadays epistocracy is interpreted in a lot different ways, giving opportunity to people to vote for the leaders. The main difference between epistocracy and democracy is that not all people are given the right to

vote – only “knowledgeable” have this right. Of course, still it does sound pretty authoritarian because it is government which decides who is “knowledgeable” enough to get this right. Currently there are few theorems that decide how to give people the right to vote.

Jason Brennan in his book *Against Democracy* proposed theory of limited vote. He stated that “No one has the right to vote. It can only be granted to those who succeed in a political competence test or those that have certain high education”. In my opinion, this theory is the most rational, because in order to make decisions you have to be certain in them.

However, democracy operates in the opposite way: every person is granted the right to vote regardless of their level of competence. As a result, political scientists who are knowledgeable about candidates are placed on the same level as uneducated individuals who do not understand them at all, which I consider the main issue of democracy. This results into candidates being able to buy votes. Such bribery was extremely persistent in Ukrainian’s 2004 elections, where both candidates were accused of bribery, by giving food and money to electorate [4].

There is also a theory proposed by John Stuart Mill in 19th century. He proposed that “The right to vote doesn’t mean the equal right vote. Those who succeed in political competence or high education gain additional votes”. This theory is more liberal than the previous one, however it faces the danger of quantity: those who don’t have additional votes can overtake those who have additional votes [5].

Philosophers also proposed a theory of separate epistocratic parliament. It coexists with democratic structures, such as democratic parliament (which is elected by democratic vote). However, epistocratic parliament, which consists of competent and knowledgeable can veto a law that democratic parliament passes. In my opinion, this idea is pretty rational and way more liberal than the previous one, but it also faces danger, such as a risk of political unrest: if they veto a law that the majority of democratic parliament supports – it can lead to horrific consequences such as political vacuum, paralysis of political structures and even civil wars.

The main challenge of epistocracy lies in determining who gets to decide who is “knowledgeable” and who is not. In most theories, this is based on government-administered tests or educational attainment. However, this issue arises primarily when the government is improperly elected and incompetent individuals occupy positions of power. I believe that humanity can eventually realize a true form of epistocracy without resorting to the usurpation of authority.

Meritocracy is pretty similar to epistocracy and in fact considered to be a part of epistocracy. The main difference between them is that meritocracy gives the right to govern to people who demonstrated ability and merit. Also meritocracy is more about deciding who is able to govern, while most ideas of modern epistocracy are about deciding who should be able to vote [6].

Unlike epistocracy, meritocracy did not stay as concept and once was achieved in China between 10th and 13th centuries. People who wanted to represent government had to take “keju” – art, Confucianism and administrative issues exams.

EXAMPLES OF MERITOCRACY AND EPISTOCRACY IN GOVERNING SMALL ORGANIZATIONS

The principles of meritocracy and epistocracy are not only relevant at the level of nation-states but can also be observed in the governance of smaller organizations. In such contexts, decision-making power is often allocated based on competence, expertise, or demonstrated achievements rather than universal popular consent.

In professional or semi-professional theaters, the appointment of a theater director often reflects meritocratic principles. Candidates are typically evaluated based on their prior experience in directing, their artistic vision, and their capacity to manage both creative and administrative tasks. A panel of senior actors, artistic advisors, and critics usually assesses these qualifications, ensuring that the leadership possesses the necessary skills to make informed artistic decisions. This form of governance aligns with the principles of epistocracy, as the power to appoint the director is concentrated in the hands of those with expertise in the theatrical field rather than the broader, less-informed staff or audience. The system ensures that decisions regarding repertoire, casting, and production quality are made by individuals competent to judge their implications.

In educational institutions, the selection of a principal or headteacher frequently combines meritocratic and epistocratic elements. Candidates are generally evaluated according to their educational qualifications, administrative experience, and leadership competencies. Some institutions may require candidates to undergo formal assessments or present strategic plans for the school. Although teachers, parents, and sometimes

students may provide advisory input, the final decision is made by an expert committee, such as a school board or local education authority. This approach ensures that those who hold the authority to govern the institution are capable of implementing effective educational policies, maintaining high standards of teaching, and managing the school's resources efficiently. It exemplifies epistocracy because voting power and decision-making authority are granted to a small, knowledgeable group rather than distributed equally among all stakeholders.

In industrial or manufacturing settings, the appointment of a factory manager or plant supervisor similarly demonstrates meritocratic and epistocratic principles. Senior management typically evaluates candidates based on technical expertise, leadership experience, and the ability to ensure productivity, safety, and operational efficiency. Workers on the factory floor do not usually participate in the selection process, as the effective governance of complex industrial operations requires specialized knowledge. By entrusting authority to individuals who have demonstrated competence, the organization minimizes the risk of mismanagement and ensures that operational decisions are made by those qualified to assess their impact. This mirrors the fundamental ideas of epistocracy: knowledge and skill serve as prerequisites for political or administrative authority.

The key distinction between meritocratic or epistocratic governance and democratic systems lies in the allocation of political rights and decision-making power. In democratic models, all members of a community – regardless of knowledge, competence, or experience – have the right to vote, and almost anyone can stand as a candidate. This approach assumes that equality in participation is inherently fair. However, such inclusivity can lead to suboptimal decision-making, especially in complex organizations, where uninformed or inexperienced participants may inadvertently make choices that hinder efficiency or compromise long-term goals.

In contrast, meritocratic and epistocratic systems impose qualifications both for voters and candidates. For instance, before a worker is granted the right to vote in organizational elections, they may be required to demonstrate a minimum level of experience or familiarity with the organization's operations. This ensures that their choices are informed, grounded in practical understanding, and oriented toward the organization's well-being. Similarly, candidates for leadership positions must demonstrate expertise in governance, management, or the relevant domain to qualify for election. By restricting participation to those who possess the necessary knowledge or experience, these systems aim to reduce the risk of poorly informed decisions and to enhance the overall quality of governance.

Critically, while democracy prioritizes equality of participation, it often sacrifices competence in decision-making. In large organizations or states, the average voter may lack sufficient understanding of intricate administrative, technical, or strategic issues, leading to choices influenced more by popularity, ideology, or short-term appeal than by rational assessment. This problem is further compounded when candidates themselves are evaluated primarily on charisma or public image rather than their ability to effectively manage and lead. By contrast, meritocracy and epistocracy place competence at the center of governance, ensuring that both the electorate and the leadership possess the skills and knowledge necessary to make informed, rational, and sustainable decisions.

While critics may argue that such systems limit political freedom and appear elitist, proponents emphasize that the exclusion is not arbitrary but based on demonstrable expertise and experience. In practical terms, this approach reduces the likelihood of mismanagement, protects organizational stability, and fosters long-term growth – objectives that purely democratic systems may struggle to achieve, particularly in highly complex or specialized environments. Therefore, although epistocracy and meritocracy may seem restrictive, they can provide a model of governance that balances fairness with competence, offering a rational alternative to the indiscriminate inclusivity of traditional democracy.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, epistocracy represents a compelling solution to the persistent problem of incompetent or unqualified individuals occupying positions of power. By prioritizing knowledge, experience, and demonstrated competence in both voters and candidates, epistocratic systems aim to ensure that decisions are informed, rational, and conducive to the long-term well-being of organizations or states. This model addresses a fundamental weakness of traditional democracy, where universal suffrage can sometimes allow decisions to be driven by popularity, emotion, or insufficient understanding rather than expertise.

However, while the theoretical benefits of epistocracy are clear, implementing such a system in practice remains highly challenging. Determining who is “knowledgeable” enough to participate, avoiding potential abuses of power, and ensuring fairness in access to political qualifications are complex problems that could undermine the ideal of rational governance. Consequently, while epistocracy offers an attractive alternative to purely democratic models, it continues to exist largely as a utopian vision – an aspirational framework that highlights the importance of competence in governance, even if fully realizing it may be difficult in contemporary political realities. Still Antoine de Saint-Exupéry once wrote, “If a person believes in an idea, it can become reality.”.

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Волков Ярослав Олегович – студент 2 курсу Вінницького національного технічного університету, факультету інформаційних технологій та комп’ютерної інженерії, групи 5ПІ-24б, м. Вінниця, e-mail: jaroslavvolk9@gmail.com

Науковий керівник: **Кухарчук Галина Вікторівна** – викладач кафедри іноземних мов, Вінницький національний технічний університет, м. Вінниця, e-mail: galinakuh07@gmail.com.

Volkov Yaroslav Olegovich – 2nd-year student at Vinnytsia National Technical University, Faculty of Information Technology and Computer Engineering, group 5PI-24b, Vinnytsia, e-mail: jaroslavvolk9@gmail.com.

Supervisor: **Kukharchuk Galyna Viktorivna** – an Assistant Professor of Foreign Languages Department, Vinnytsia National Technical University, Vinnytsia, e-mail: galinakuh07@gmail.com.