

Epistemic Network Injustice

Extended Abstract

If we are uncertain about which political choice is in our best interest, it can be helpful to consult with others and take their advice into account. Voters often do not know what is in their best interest, especially if the relation between means and ends is not transparent: even if one is certain about the ends, the choice of means is non-trivial. Since political choices are rarely directly about ends but much more often about means to promote ends, knowing what one ‘really’ wants can be particularly hard in such contexts. This becomes important in elections or referendums. If all of one group – let’s call them the ‘Masses’ – knew which alternative best promotes their interest, they would easily beat the smaller but potentially more informed and more organized ‘Elites’. But if the Masses don’t know and their vote splits in the middle, then the Elites might swing the vote to their advantage.

When trying to identify one’s ‘true’ interests, asking one’s peers and pursuing one’s interest in solidarity might help. Solidarity is typically understood as a value appealed to in the context of collective action (Kolers 2016; Sangiovanni 2015). The Masses can overcome oppression or domination by the Elites if they act in solidarity in their joint pursuit of change. But there is a different aspect to solidarity that has been discussed less often, but which is in an important sense prior to collective action: solidarity can also help to identify what the Masses really want. To clarify their interests, the Masses can practice *epistemic solidarity*. They can pool the information they hold individually in a pre-election ballot and then successfully commit to vote for the result of their pre-ballot, making use of the dispersed information they hold. If they do, the Masses will not only have a good chance to identify what is in their interest (because of Condorcet’s Jury Theorem and related results: Condorcet 1785; see also Dietrich and Spiekermann 2013), they are also likely to outvote the Elites because they coordinate their vote.

The strategy of epistemic solidarity comes with a catch — it only works if one asks people with the same fundamental interests. However, identifying one’s epistemic peers is not a trivial task. To demonstrate, I consider a stylized political setting,

an electoral competition of ‘Masses’ and ‘Elites’. To succeed, the Masses need to know which alternative on offer is truly in their interest. To find out, the Masses can pool their privately held information in a pre-election ballot, provided that they can reliably find out with whom they should pool information. I investigate the process of finding the relevant peer group for information pooling by modeling this group formation process as dynamic network change. More specifically, I consider some simple but suggestive mechanisms for making the formation of peer groups endogenous. Looking at several dynamics of group formation provides us with clues which factors may enable the Elites or Masses to identify a good epistemic peer group to use for information pooling, in order to win the vote. Agent-based simulations show that the Masses can succeed in finding the right peers, but they also suggest reasons why the Elites may often be more successful.

One outcome is of special interest from a democratic perspective: the possibility that a smaller group of more knowledgeable or more organized individuals with a minority interest outvotes the majority. Normally, this should not happen: even if the Masses are less competent they should still be able to outvote the Elites, as long as the Masses manage to organize a pre-vote *en bloc* and then stick to that pre-vote, practising epistemic solidarity. But there are good reasons to believe that the Elites are advantaged in many ways: they tend to ‘know the people in the know’, they tend to be well-connected, and they are smaller, which often makes collective action easier to organize. My simulations uncover several ways how the Elites might dominate the Masses. Even if the Elites are not more competent in recognizing each other directly, they might have other advantages, such as a better memory to identify their peers, or a higher competence that makes it easier to recognize each other. Under such conditions the smaller group tends to succeed in coordinating their vote while the larger group is often divided and confused.

The phenomenon of unequal capabilities to identify and use epistemic peers generalizes to the notion of epistemic network injustice. Such injustice arises when a subset of citizens is systematically deprived of connections to helpful epistemic peers, leading to their reduced political influence. Epistemic network injustice is a new form of epistemic injustice, related to but distinct from the notion introduced by Miranda Fricker (2007).

Keywords: solidarity, Condorcet jury theorem, networks, information aggregation, epistemic democracy, epistemic injustice

References

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