

Political Epistemology: Democracy and the Problem of Strategic Manipulation

Democracy's epistemic virtue and the 'wisdom of crowds' constitute central themes in democratic theory. However, recent political developments – particularly growing concerns about 'fake news', partisan polarisation and populist rhetoric – challenge the widely accepted proposition that democratic institutions facilitate epistemically superior collective decisions. This mismatch between ideals and practice alludes to 'Democracy's epistemic crisis' and invites the question: (How) can epistemic theories of democracy stand up to these novel challenges?

This project analyses the role of strategic manipulation in collective opinion formation and decision making, which stands at the heart of these troubling phenomena. It aims to reassess and reaffirm democracy's epistemic virtue in light of these newly emerging challenges. In doing so, the project contributes to a small but growing literature on *Political Epistemology*, which combines insights from social epistemology and political philosophy.

Various contributions in social epistemology address questions of collective knowledge formation, yet only few abandon the assumption of individual honesty. This renders them largely inapplicable for a variety of political contexts, as conflicting interests may incentivise information misrepresentation. To bridge this lacuna, this project provides a series of agent-based models (ABMs) to simulate group decisions under the influence of strategic manipulation.

ABMs allow capturing crucial dynamic aspects of social knowledge formation and enable incorporating and analysing different manipulation strategies. Furthermore, the proposed models address specific sub-issues, such as the impact of communication structures, (lack of) trust in epistemic authorities as well as conflicting interests.

Accompanying the formal modelling, political epistemology's core issues are conceptually and philosophically analysed: How can different theories of epistemic democracy cope with manipulation and misinformed citizens? Are there implications for democratic legitimacy? And what countermeasures are normatively justifiable for democratic actors?

Addressing these questions in the proposed form contributes to an informed assessment of the societal implications of politicised epistemic discussions generally. In particular, it deepens our understanding of manipulation strategies, potential counter-strategies and epistemically resilient institutional structures. At the same time, this advances the use of agent-based modeling in political philosophy.

Project status: Two related papers published, one under review, one submitted DFG-proposal