Rationally Speaking #176: Jason Brennan on "Against democracy"

Julia Galef: Welcome to Rationally Speaking, the podcast where we explore the borderlands between reason and nonsense. I'm your host, Julia Galef, and with me is today's guest, Professor Jason Brennan.

Jason is a professor of strategy, economics, ethics, and public policy at Georgetown University, and he's the author of seven books, most recently *Against Democracy*, which is the book that we're going to be talking about in today's episode. It lays out the case that democracy is not actually the best system of government, either from a philosophical or moral perspective, or from an empirical perspective. Jason, welcome to the show.

Jason Brennan: Thanks for having me.

Julia Galef: I'll just, to kick things off, tell you the moment when I decided I wanted to have an episode about objections to democracy. It was during an interview where I was myself being interviewed. I was being asked about motivated reasoning and other cognitive biases, and how they undermine the democratic process and introduce all these problems into our political discourse.

I was talking about all of these flaws with democracy, and then I hastened to add, "But of course, that doesn't mean we shouldn't have a democracy." As I said it, I had this moment where I realized I didn't say that because I believe it's true. I may well believe it's true, but that wasn't what motivated me to say it. I said it because I felt like I had to.

I think that the position that maybe democracy's not the best system after all is one of those things you can't say -- that Paul Graham wrote about in his essay *Things You Can't Say*, where they're positions that are off limits enough in our current climate that it's hard to think and especially talk clearly about them, which seemed bad.

So even before we get into the specifics of your case against democracy, I think I just want to make the meta-point that I think it's good for discourse that you're raising these questions.

Jason Brennan: Thank you. I agree with you. It's a taboo topic for most people. They say it's axiomatic that democracy is the best system, and we're not even supposed to really debate that.

Julia Galef: Is that also your impression of the discourse within the field of political science or political philosophy, that it's taboo?

Jason Brennan: In a sense, yes and no. I think in political science, there is a famous political theorist who, a couple years ago, maybe about 20 years ago, said, "It's just taken as an axiom," and I think in political theory as done by political scientists, they do just try to take it for granted. Philosophy on the other hand, there's much more of a taste for the avant-garde and willingness to question basic assumptions. I think

it's more open in philosophy where people take seriously the idea that actually it might simply be a prejudice of ours or maybe it's not the best system.

Julia Galef: I call that a "taste for bullets," in the sense of people enjoying biting bullets that are maybe unpalatable to most people. That's sort of what the philosophers crave.

Jason Brennan: It's a profession. You're supposed to be examining things that everyone else takes for granted. Being unwilling to do that is, in a sense, making you a bad philosopher.

Julia Galef: Right. Honestly, to the extent that it's a bias, I think it's probably a valuable bias overall. I'm not really complaining about it, just pointing at it.

There's a bunch of pieces to your argument, but why don't you just lay out the basic case first, and then we can go deep down some of the branches?

Jason Brennan: Sure. I guess what I'm really attacking in the book is something I call democratic triumphalism. That's the view that democracy really deserves three cheers.

Cheer number one is that democracy is good for us because it leads to just and good outcomes, defined independently of the procedure. Another cheer that people give is that democracy is good for us because it makes us better, smarter, more noble people. Finally, a lot of people say that democracy is good as an end in itself.

I'm skeptical of all three of those claims. I don't think a democracy is good in itself. I'm trying to convince people that the kind of value it has is the same type of value that a hammer has. It's merely an instrument for producing outcomes, and if we can find a better hammer, we should feel free to use it.

I think the claim that it ennobles and enlightens us is actually false. I think we've done a lot of testing of that and it actually gets things backwards. For the most part, democratic participation I think corrupts us and stultifies us rather than ennobles and enlightens us.

In terms of the final question about does it produce good outcomes, I think yeah. Overall, it does compared to many of the alternatives that we've tried. If you compare democracies to, say, theocratic systems or autarchical systems or so on, I think it clearly functions better overall -- but that said, it's not clear that we can't replace it with an even better alternative.

We do know that there are these pervasive pathologies in democracy. To put it in overly simplified terms: at the end of the day, democracy works, and politicians have a fairly strong tendency to try to do the things that voters want. But voters are badly informed, they're ignorant, they're even irrational and misinformed. As a result, they choose policies they would not advocate if they were better informed or more rational, and so democracies systematically get suboptimal policies.

If that's the case, then I want to entertain the idea that there might even be alternative representative political systems, that in some way reduce universal suffrage or limit the power of voters, and might produce better outcomes. Though I say kind of skeptically in the book, "We don't really know that yet because we haven't really tried them so we're, at best, sort of forced to speculate."

Julia Galef: To clarify, probably when people hear “rejecting” democracy or tossing democracy aside in favor of something else, they're probably picturing something like a dictatorship or a monarchy or other political systems that we have tried historically, and feeling like, "Gee, it seems pretty unlikely that would be an improvement over democracy." But you're talking about something that people sometimes call epistocracy, right? The people who are voting, are making the political decisions, are a selected subset of all voters. That's really the distinction. When you talk about rejecting democracy, it's really about who's making the decision – or rather, who's voting, not about whether people vote.

Jason Brennan: Yeah, that's right. One way of thinking about it is if you concentrate power in the hands of a very small number of people, they have a very strong incentive to use that power wisely in a sense of paying a lot of attention to what they do with it, but they have an incentive to use the power selfishly for their own ends because they can unilaterally make decisions. That's what happens with dictators.

If you make the power widespread so that everyone has access to power, they lose any incentive to use it selfishly, but they also lose any incentive to be smart in how they use it. And so we find, and I'm sure we'll talk about this at length, that most voters are deeply misinformed, ignorant, or even irrational. It's because there's nothing that prevents them from doing that.

An epistocratic system in a sense tries to split the difference by selecting a subgroup of all the voters, finding those that are somewhat higher information, and allowing them to vote, but making sure the power's so widespread that they still lack the incentive to use it selfishly.

Julia Galef: Going back to the three arguments for democracy, of which you disagree with all of them, I think maybe we should dispense with the middle one first, because it was the one that I'm least interested in or least convinced by, which is the argument that democracy empowers people. I guess it's not obvious to me that we should expect it to empower people who aren't already active and engaged and questioning and trying to get the best outcomes for society. Why is that a fundamental argument? What is the case for democracy empowering people?

Jason Brennan: There's a couple different versions of that argument. Sometimes people say things like, "In a democracy, you have sort of autonomous control over the outcome in a way that you don't in an autocracy," or they'll say that, "You're allowed to sort of shape the outcomes to your preferences."

The problem with any kind of argument like this is it's just obviously false. The probability that my vote will be decisive is on most models vanishingly small. There is some disagreement in political science about just how small it is, but

there's a lot of agreement that it is quite small. In the same way that I don't feel like I have a lot of power in virtue of having a lottery ticket, it would be weird to say I have a lot of power in virtue of having a vote.

Robert Nozick, the philosopher at Harvard, famously has a story called *The Tale of the Slave* which I won't recount the entire thing here because it will take too long. It involves this thought experiment, where it starts off with you being a slave and it ends with you being in a modern democracy. In the end, you're like, "Yes, okay. What's the difference?" There is a difference, but the point of it is to show that just by virtue of getting a vote, you don't suddenly become an autonomous, powerful individual.

It's not just that it makes it autonomous. People will also make a more interesting empirical claim. They'll say that maybe getting you to participate in politics will make you smarter, or more enlightened, or more noble. John Stuart Mill, writing in the 1800s, this is one of the arguments that he used in favor of representative government, though he didn't end up being a democrat himself. He felt like people were working in Manchester factories or London factories and they were completely unaware of politics, and maybe if we get them to participate, it'll be like getting a fish to recognize that there is a world outside of the ocean, and they'll come to have greater concern for one another. They'll have a more enlightened point of view. It will force them to think about these deep issues, and that will make them smarter.

That's in a sense an empirical claim about what participation does for us. I think over the past 150 years we've had basically a test of that claim, and found that it gets things backwards. In fact, politics tends to I think make us dumb and mean.

Julia Galef: Can you elaborate on that a little bit?

Jason Brennan: Sure. Chapter three has at great lengths a review of the literature on this point. It pretty much works out to be something like this:

Because our votes don't matter very much, we are in a sense able to use political ideology not as a way of forming true beliefs about the world that we might get punished or rewarded for, but rather as a banner or flag around which we can rally. We end up using political beliefs in order to form in-groups and out-groups. There's a lot of experiments showing that we just automatically do this about really mundane things, and politics, because it's cost-free, when you're wrong in politics it won't make a difference, we're able to use these political beliefs that way.

What ends up happening is people who care about politics tend to have it be part of their tribal identity, and they just end up being angry and nasty towards people on the other side, overly forgiving and hypocritical towards their own side. There's a pretty good work by the political scientist Diana Mutz, this book called *Hearing The Other Side*, where she asks the question, if you're a Democrat, can you explain to me why anyone would be a Republican?

If your answer is, "Because they're stupid and evil," that predicts that you heavily participate in politics. If, on the other hand, you're able to explain points of view, the other point of view in a way that the other side would find appealing, that predicts you don't participate in politics. She does a lot of work like that.

Julia Galef: That's depressing.

Jason Brennan: Yeah, it's really depressing. They're doing all these experiments, really being done by people who are trying to prove that democracy works. There are all these experiments getting people to deliberate with one another in the hopes that it'll make them smarter and nicer. And if you read the review of the literature I did in chapter three, most of these experiments get negative results.

Even the results that are often framed as neutral results are, if you think about it, actually quite negative. It's pretty uncommon for people to learn very much during deliberation. They often will come to blows or get angry at one another, or they'll avoid talking about controversial topics, or deliberation doesn't do any better than just giving them a piece of paper and some basic facts, etc., etc. They're much more swayed by things like the attractiveness of the other side or the perceived influence rather than the quality of their arguments or the quality of their evidence.

My metaphor at the end is, I divide political citizens into three archetypes. One of them I call hooligans. If you've ever been to a soccer game or you watch sports or something, you know that a lot of sports fans have a huge amount of information about the sport, but they're also very biased in how they process that information. New England Patriots fans of course believe that Tom Brady's innocent, and everyone else believes that he's guilty, and we all have access to the same information but we're evaluating that information in a way that's biased to our side. I think most people who participate in politics are what I call hooligans like that. They have some information, but they're biased in how they process it.

Julia Galef: Then the other two archetypes?

Jason Brennan: Sure. If you've ever read any Lord of the Rings novels or you've watched the movies, you can think about hobbits. Hobbits are these creatures in The Lord of the Rings that don't really care much about the outside world. They just want to eat breakfast and second breakfast, and have their elevensies, and smoke their pipes and chill out, and they're not really interested in adventure and the outside world. The political analogue of that would be the typical non-voter in the U.S., who doesn't have very many political opinions. If that person gives an opinion, it's not a stable opinion. He or she will change her mind in the next day. They don't know very much, and they just don't care.

In a sense, democracy is the rule of hobbits and hooligans. The typical non-voter is a hobbit -- doesn't care much, doesn't know much; and the typical voter is a hooligan -- cares a lot, knows a little bit more, but is super biased.

My third archetype, which is maybe a non-existent category, maybe except for perhaps your listeners-

Julia Galef: It's an aspirational category.

Jason Brennan: An aspirational category I call Vulcans. You think about Vulcans being dispassionate scientists who are not really loyal to their beliefs but willing to update their beliefs when the new evidence comes in, perhaps by following Bayes or something like that.

The problem is, many theories of democracy assume that people will behave the way Vulcans do, but they don't. They behave as hobbits and hooligans, and so a good philosophical theory of democracy or good justification for democracy has to deal with what human beings are actually like rather than what we wish they were like.

Julia Galef: So the theory that we were originally talking about -- that democracy will empower and ennoble people, and show them that there's a world outside the water they're swimming in -- is assuming that it will take hobbits or maybe also hooligans and turn them into Vulcans, or something like that. And that's just not what we see.

Jason Brennan: Yeah, that's right. You might think of it as, John Stuart Mill was hypothesizing most people were hobbits, but if we get them to do politics they'll become Vulcans. We actually test that hypothesis. We find that in fact almost all hobbits are just potential hooligans, and the more we get them to participate in politics, the more hooligan-ish they become. When hooligans deliberate, they get worse. When Vulcans deliberate, they get better. As a matter of fact, most people are hooligans.

Julia Galef: Right. I've also become ... I don't know about your trajectory. My trajectory is that I've become more pessimistic about people's ability to deliberate and update their opinions about political issues over the years, as I've thought about this and observed the world. Partly that's been observing the evidence, but it's also been thinking theoretically, or just thinking a priori about what we should expect humans to be good at. If you look at what our human brain evolved to do, what it adapted for, it really wasn't ... It didn't evolve to deal successfully with these complex, abstract, long-term questions that aren't directly relevant to their everyday lives.

In a sense, and you actually say this in the book, it's instrumentally rational to not think epistemically rationally about political questions. Because the payoff you get from being accurate about things like tax policy is pretty tiny and indirect compared to the payoff you get from not having to do a lot of research and from not having to spend the resources just thinking hard about things, or the payoff that you get from being able to maintain strong ties to your tribe and feel confident and good about yourself. That all makes a lot of sense, that our brains would opt instead for hooliganism, but it's pretty sad.

Jason Brennan: Yeah, I think you're right about that. If I remember the names of the people correctly, I think it's Dan Sperber and Hugo Mercier. They call it the argumentative theory of reasoning, and the claim is that our capacity for reasoning developed really to form coalitions and to influence and persuade others, and to not develop for the purposes of forming abstract scientific beliefs about how the world works.

Julia Galef: Right. Now maybe it's time to talk about ... I think I want to opt for the argument for democracy being a good thing in itself, that it's a moral or just system regardless of the outcomes it causes. What I thought was so interesting about your treatment of this question was that you go beyond saying that, "No, morality or justice doesn't require democracy." You actually make this interesting case that morality and justice require us *not* to have democracy. How does that go?

Jason Brennan: There are a lot of cases where we think intuitively that competence is a precondition for someone having any kind of authority. An example I give that most people find persuasive is with regard to a jury trial. I say, "Imagine that you are being tried in a capital murder case, and in one case the jury completely ignores the evidence at hand, and they don't even read the transcript of what transpired during the case. They just flip a coin and say okay, you're guilty because a coin says so." You would think that that's unjust and the decision shouldn't stand.

Julia Galef: Right, there's a wrong that has been done there.

Jason Brennan: Yeah. Suppose instead they pay attention to the facts, but they process them in a really biased way. They happen to believe in the conspiracy theory that you're one of the lizard people, so they decide to find you guilty for that reason even though the evidence doesn't point that way. Again, we'd think that they'd done something unjust.

Suppose that they decide to find you guilty because they just don't like you, or they find you guilty because they'd been paid off to find you guilty by someone who doesn't like you, like the rival bagel maker has paid them off to find you guilty.

In each of these cases, we think what the jury's done is unjust. And what it seems like is the jury owes to either the defendant or society at large, there perhaps both, is both competence and good faith. When you're making a high stakes decision that's going to be imposed involuntarily upon another person, that can deprive that person of life, liberty, happiness, and their rights or whatever, then you owe that person to make that decision competently and in good faith. If you fail to do that, then your decision really lacks any kind of legitimacy or authority.

When I give that example, most everyone agrees to it, so then I ask, "What about democratic decision-making?" When an electorate is deciding who's going to be President or who's going to run the country, it seems like they're also making a high stakes decision that can deprive people of life, liberty, and their property, or their rights, and which will be imposed involuntarily. I don't think democracy is a

voluntary system. I get through that in chapter four. Why not say that the electorate also owes it to the people that are governed to be competent and to act in good faith?

Then I think they just systematically violate that requirement. They don't act competently, and they don't act in good faith. There's actually almost a tension here that happens, because sometimes people say, "No, political decisions are not actually high stakes. What the electorate decides does not count as high stakes." They run into a problem, because if you really believe that, then you might not be so worried about democratic incompetence, but then you don't have any particularly good reason to be in favor of democracy, either, because you're just basically saying, "Yeah, democracy doesn't matter," but if you think it does matter, then you have to start worrying that maybe they should be competent.

Julia Galef: The jury intuition pump was pretty effective for me. The other part of that argument that I thought that struck me was that I think people, including myself, are used to thinking of democracy at the level of the society, where even if the society chooses bad outcomes, there isn't an injustice or a wrong that has been done there because the society chose them. It's like if a person does something self-destructive, that's not immoral in the way that it would be if he did something destructive to another person.

But, you argue, that's not actually necessarily the right level of analysis, because there are a bunch of ... Society is made up of a bunch of individual people, and some of those people are making decisions. Each of those people is making decisions for the other people, and some of the people making the decisions are doing so in a way that is clearly incompetent or negligent or corrupt, and that's causing harm to other people. It's not really analogous to an individual doing something self-destructive.

Jason Brennan: Yeah, that's absolutely right. If we had a case where literally every single person who was affected by the decision unanimously agreed to it, and it was destructive, again there'd be no reason to think it was an injustice because they accepted it, but in reality, in every democratic system, it's a small minority of people who impose their will upon everybody else. Even if you had a high turnout, there's still ... Take American politics. When American voters are deciding, they're not just deciding for themselves and for the minority voters, but they're also deciding for children. They're deciding for resident aliens who are affected by the decisions but aren't allowed to vote. They're also deciding for people who live in other countries. Our choosing Donald Trump as President can have momentous implications for the rest of the world in a way that, say, I don't know, whoever Switzerland will pick as its next prime minister probably won't matter as much.

Julia Galef: Burn.

Jason Brennan: Yeah, sorry, Switzerland. They're a great country, but it won't matter as much.

Julia Galef: There was an argument that I guess would be classified as an argument for the intrinsic good of democracy, that you call a “semiotic” defense of democracy. I

thought that was a really good word, because I've run into what you're calling semiotic arguments before -- more in college than I do now, because I was forced to read a lot of texts that take the semiotic approach to discussing society and policy. I don't read those texts of my own free will anymore.

But the argument is basically that democracy is good because it *signifies* or *symbolizes* something that we think is good. It symbolizes people's empowerment or equal dignity as human beings or something like that.

…I don't know if I'm explaining it correctly. How would you describe the semiotic argument for democracy?

Jason Brennan: Yeah, that's right. Maybe it's a big theme of my work, actually, is I just don't like symbolic arguments for policy. The book that came out right before this one was called *Markets Without Limits*, and it was really taking down semiotic arguments against things like kidney markets and so on. It was an application of that same argument.

Lots of people get impressed by the idea that we should have certain policies not because they're effective but because the policies express something. People say things like ... Really, indeed, a lot of people have. They say, "Sure, kidney markets will save lives, but they express disrespect for the human body, so therefore we shouldn't have them."

Which is weird. To me that reads a little bit like saying, "I want to show my concern for the plight of orphans, and the way I'm going to do that is by building a statute made out of murdered orphan parts."

Julia Galef: Ha, wow. Well, the steel man of that argument – or, the version of the argument that I have some sympathy for -- is one that cashes out the symbolism into its consequences. What we mean by "it signifies a disrespect for orphans" is "it will cause people to have less regard for orphans in the future," and that will lead for worse consequences for orphans.

Jason Brennan: I agree that that's a better argument, but believe it or not-

Julia Galef: That's not the one they're making?

Jason Brennan: That's actually the argument they need to make. They don't. Sometimes people mean to say, "We need to have this practice because it will have certain consequences," but usually people will ... It's like the organ debate. People like Michael Sandel and others, they mean this to be independent of the consequentialist concerns. They really mean ... This is what everyone jumps back on when all the other arguments run out.

When it comes to democracy, it's somewhat plausible. If you think about what we use the right to vote to mean, say Nazi Germany made Jews wear the Star of David, and that was a public affirmation of their second-class status, that they were inferior. As a matter of fact, if you look at American history, we've used the

right to vote as a way of publicly affirming that you are a full and equal member of society. Once the culture develops enough to regard a previously second-class group as being on par with it, then we extend the right to vote to them. We extend the vote to women, or to non-property owners, and to blacks, and some others.

So it's true that the right to vote, as a matter of fact, has all of this symbolic value. We use it to say, "You are a full and equal member of society." Given that we use it that way, to take away someone's right to vote would be like giving them the middle finger. It does in fact have that meaning. I agree that it has that meaning.

But then I have to ask, *why* does it have that meaning? Is it written into the fabric of the universe that it has that meaning? It doesn't look like it is. Rather, it looks like it's just a contingent cultural fact about us, that we happen to have imbued the right to vote with all that meaning.

You can at least imagine a society in which failing to have the right to vote has no further stigma than failing to have a plumbing license has in our society. I'm not allowed to practice plumbing, legally speaking. I don't even like plumbing licenses, to be frank, but I don't feel like I'm made into an inferior citizen. I don't feel like that's society's way of shaming me or saying I'm second-class, because we just haven't imbued plumbing licenses with that kind of status. But we have with the right to vote.

Then can we ask, should we? Is that a good way of imbuing? I think you can actually judge semiotic codes by their consequences. Here's just an example of that. The Fore tribe of Papua New Guinea used to have a semiotic code under which in order to show respect for your father, upon his death you're supposed to eat his brain. Failure to do so would be disrespectful. It's a social construct, and it's fine as far as it goes -- but then it turned out that doing this actually was killing people, because they were getting a prion-based disease as a basis of eating brains. So they stopped doing it. They changed their code.

What if it turned out that the practice of imbuing the right to vote with all this power was similarly destructive, it was similarly causing harm to people? If that were the case, I think it's reason to maybe change the semiotic practice.

Again, another ideology which is, imagine a society in which no one cares about the right to vote. They just treat that as purely instrumental. They have no real concern for it. In that society, everyone upon age 18 gets a red scarf from the government, but then a new right-wing government comes to power, and they stop giving it to gay people. You'd imagine that in that society people would march in the streets and say, "Isn't it so disrespectful that they're not giving the red scarf to gays upon turning age 18? You need to overturn it."

In a sense, it would make sense in that society, based upon their culture, to demand that people get a red scarf, but we in our culture can look and go, "Yeah, there's really nothing about red scarves that signifies respect. It's just a contingent social construct."

I'm trying to make the case in chapter five that the right to vote is like that, too. It's just a way we happen to think. It's not written into the fabric of the universe, and if it turns out to be destructive, we should change it. If it turns out not to be destructive, we should keep it.

Julia Galef: Right. I guess when I talked about the importance of cashing out semiotic arguments in terms of consequences, I count "insulting people" as a consequence that should enter into the cost-benefit analysis. The version of semiotic arguments that I just really can't stand are the ones that talk about the meaning of something *independent* of either how a randomly selected person is likely to interpret it, and also independently of how it was intended. It's just the objective meaning ... It's like a textual analysis approach to social policy, which drives me up the wall. But I agree there's a spectrum of reasonableness to semiotic arguments.

Jason Brennan: Yeah. The example I like to give, and my coauthor Peter from my previous book likes to give too, is to say, imagine it turned out that when we say, "Go to hell," that creates sound vibrations which in turn makes the molecules in your body vibrate in a certain way that kills cancer. If we learned that saying, "Go to hell," had that effect, what we do, the right thing to do would be to change the meaning of the English language and make that an informal greeting. You just walk around saying, "Go to hell, everybody."

That would be a case where we would want to change the insult that's associated with the words. What if it turns out that distributing the right to vote on the basis of competence leads to vastly greater growth, less incarceration, lower crime rates, less war, less death, less suffering, less poverty? Suppose it did that. Then, we might want to go, "Hey, maybe we shouldn't imbue the right to vote with all of this symbolic status. Maybe we should just treat it like a plumbing license."

Julia Galef: So far, we've been focusing on the parts of your argument that really resonate with me, that I really agree with. At this point, maybe it makes sense for me to tell you the few objections that I have that I didn't quite feel like you answered in the book and talk about that.

Jason Brennan: Sure.

Julia Galef: The first major objection I had was that when someone votes, what they're doing is -- there are two things that are happening at once there, in addition to the symbolic or self-expression of their vote. First, they're conveying their empirical beliefs about their world. They're voting based on their beliefs about what the outcomes of various policies will be. They're voting based on their beliefs about factual questions, like how much of our budget are we currently spending on foreign aid, that sort of thing. Those things determine their vote.

But they're also based on their values and their preferences. And when I imagine an epistocracy in which the vote is being restricted to people who have the highest information or the most education, it seems to me that even if the empirical content of the vote is much better than it was before under a full

democracy, you're still losing out on the ... You're no longer capturing the values and preferences of the people who aren't voting, the low-information voters.

It's true that people's values are partly dependent on their empirical beliefs about the world, but I don't think that that *fully* determines people's values. There are all these questions like how much should we prioritize future generations' welfare over the current generations' welfare? Or, how much should we prioritize our own citizens' welfare over that of the people in other countries? Or, how much should we value the environment as a good in its own right? That sort of thing.

If I imagine a small group of highly educated people making decisions, I imagine their values would probably be not representative of the values of everyone else in the country. It seems like there's a significant loss that's happening there.

Jason Brennan: Yeah, I think you're right in a sense. Part of the problem I think here is that we don't really have a good way of disambiguating people's value judgments from their empirical judgments.

Julia Galef: Exactly.

Jason Brennan: In a sense, mass voting doesn't do it. An epistocracy doesn't really, either. The democratic theorist Tom Christiano actually wanted to have a system he called, or still does want to have a system he calls "values-only voting," in which he wants everyone to vote, but they're only allowed to vote on outcomes, in a sense values or goals. Like we should prioritize equality over growth, or we should prioritize the nation over the world at large. But they're not allowed to vote on policy. He considers himself a democrat. You might think of this as a partially epistocratic system.

Even then, there's still hard questions about thinking about people's ability to think about values. Think about if we go around asking people how much we discount future generations. As I'm sure you know, people are really bad at estimating compounding growth. I think even there, most people who have low information are not going to be in a good position to even really think clearly about that kind of trade-off, because they don't really understand what it means to have a 1%, one percentage point lower growth rate per year, or one percentage point higher growth rate per year. They don't even know what the trade-off is.

Julia Galef: That is a good example of the kind of thing, the kind of empirical or cognitive error that people can have that makes their vote less correlated with their values, their deep, true values, than it ideally should be -- but I still think you end up with *some* correlation between people's votes and their implicit values.

I also want to claim that even if people were so ignorant and poor at reasoning that their vote had no correlation with their values, that there would still be a problem with taking that vote away from them, like saying, "You clearly have no ability to make choices for yourself that are good for you. Therefore, I'm going to

make all your choices for you." That seems worrisome, even if it leads to better outcomes technically.

Jason Brennan: Yeah. I guess I'm really anti-paternalistic, probably more so than your listeners. David Eslin, the philosopher, one of the people I'm responding to, he says, "There's this fallacious reasoning where you think I know better than you, so therefore I should be your boss." I think that's wrong. I agree with him that that's not a good inference. The fact that I know better than you doesn't mean that I'm your boss.

For me the argument isn't, "I know better than you, so I should be in your charge," but rather, "You don't know what you're talking about, so you shouldn't be in charge of me." I think of it as an anti-authority tenet.

Then the question is, we have to have some sort of a decision-making process. What's left over is letting more competent people decide. Even then, when we look at the correlations that we find, we do find interesting changes that do not seem to be explained by things other than information.

Lots of people, like Brian Kaplan using one set of data, Martin Gillens using a different set of data, Scott Althouse using a third set of data, they look at things where they ask, "What do people know, who are they, and what do they want? What sort of outcomes do they want?" You can check and see, while controlling for the effect that demographic factors and other things have on your policy preferences, how does information by itself change people's policy preferences?

We find that high-information people, regardless of their socioeconomic status, regardless of their income level, regardless of their race, regardless of where they live in the U.S., tend to be cosmopolitan. And low-information people tend to be nationalist. I start to wonder. How much of this is just, it really is a pure value judgment, or are our values highly dependent upon things like what we think the factors are?

Julia Galef: I just don't see how you can ... Even if there is a huge correlation between how intelligent and educated and well-informed and rational someone is, and their values and preferences, I don't see how you can therefore conclude that their values and preferences are more *correct* than the values and preferences of the low-information, low-education voters.

Jason Brennan: I guess I think of it as an abductive argument. If I have two people who are ... If it turns out that high information people, regardless of their background, tend to think one thing, and low information people, regardless of their background, tend to think another, it seems like information's doing the work. And if I had to guess which one of those is more likely to be right, I'd go with the high-information person.

On the other hand, if you're a complete value skeptic, you're like, "There's no truth of the matter about what values are right or wrong. It's all just sort of subjective or relative," then in a sense the whole ... All political philosophy, in a

sense, assumes that that's wrong, because if that's true then there's no truth about justice. We can just do whatever the hell we want. The very debate presupposes something like, at least for some issues of justice, there's some truth of the matter, that's true independent of people believing that it's true.

Yeah, in a sense, the whole debate here is presupposing that not everyone's opinions about value are equally valid. If you think Jew murder is okay, and I think it's not, at least one of us is wrong there.

Julia Galef: Yeah, that's tricky. There's this spectrum where, on the one end, it's much more compelling to say, "No, you're just wrong about what's moral," but then towards the other end you get these things where it's not at all obvious to me whether it's correct to prioritize everyone from all countries equally with citizens of your own country, etc. For things like that, I'm much more willing to say, "People at different levels of information just have different values and preferences," and I'm not going to say that one group is more correct than the other.

Jason Brennan: Yeah, but it's weird. If there's no demographic factor or anything else that's tracking the difference, and it simply is a matter of information, that seems weird if that would be the one thing that changes. If you said high-information white people are all nationalist and high-information black people are all cosmopolitan, then you might start wondering if it's not just information that's doing the effect. It's something else that might matter when it comes to their values.

But if it's just information, if it just turns out people who can name the President, independently of anything else, they happen to be cosmopolitan, you might wonder.

Julia Galef: I would agree with you *if* we could just intervene directly on information and change that thing, and then we saw this result, the resulting value change. But instead what I predict is happening is that the processes in people's lives and societies that cause them to end up having more information and education are *also* processes that produce these different values. Does that make sense?

Jason Brennan: Yeah, maybe. That could be. But then again, we could even check for ... For anything like that that you bring up ... It's not just that we've done it. This is the good news, I guess. In principle, we could check for that. If we wonder, "Is it because you're more educated?" It's not actually information, it's education that's doing it. Then, we can correct for levels of education. In fact, people like Althouse and Kaplan and others have already done that. Actually it turns out education has no independent effect. It's actually surprising how little effect it has.

Julia Galef: That is surprising.

Jason Brennan: The education effect is actually ... Kaplan has a paper on this with regard to his stuff. The apparent education effect is actually entirely an information and an IQ effect. It's not an education effect at all. The apparent socioeconomic effect has no independent power. It's entirely an IQ and an information effect.

With any of these things, I think the solution here is not to say, "We don't know." It's rather, "We can come up with a way of testing it, so maybe we should do that and try to figure that out." If we do find there's a persistent bias, then hopefully we can take into account that, but I guess for now we're stuck. We're not in an anarchist society, we do have politics, and so the question is, which form of politics is going to be the best one, given that no matter what we're going to working with biases?

Some people who read my book, they think what I'm saying is, "Only Vulcans should rule," but a more careful reading is, "This guy doesn't think there are any Vulcans. He's talking about given that we have a bunch of hobbits and hooligans, including himself, what do we do?"

Julia Galef: Okay. There's a related concern that I wanted to bring up, which is about how we decide who's close enough to being a Vulcan that they should get extra votes or that they should get the only votes.

I of course have my own intuitive sense of what makes someone's judgment trustworthy -- and there are objective things you can point to. Phil Tetlock has done some great work showing correlates of accurate forecasting and that kind of thing. But there's still all of these subjective value judgments that go into deciding what are the metrics that we should be using to test whether someone has good judgment, to find the correlates of judgment, and that kind of thing.

I envision ... When I think about epistocracy being implemented, I see first of all, as you say in the book, the current demographics who have the highest information and the highest education, they're white, they're predominantly male, they're well off, and they already have this power advantage over other groups in society. If we then give them even more power, it just seems like they're going to have a strong incentive to define what makes a competent someone who deserves a vote, to be people like them.

Even more so, they're going to have an incentive to block other groups from getting the kind of education and information that they would need in order to qualify as competent voters. Those incentives arguably exist to some extent already, in that entrenched power structures want to preserve their power, but it seems like an epistocracy would just worsen that problem, by an order of magnitude at least.

Jason Brennan: Yeah, it very well may, and really this is one of the reasons why in the book I'm almost giving you a conditional argument: If it turns out we can make a form of epistocracy function better than democracy, you can feel free to use it, but we're not really in a position now to know whether we can. There are all these worries about public choice problems, about abuse of power, and it might just turn out that they're actually exacerbated under epistocracy to the extent that it functions worse.

One question is, are they going to jerry-rig? Say there's a qualification exam. Will it turn out that people will just rig that in favor of their own group? Will that make epistocracy end up performing worse for democracy?

Julia Galef: Just to give a quick example of that, sorry to interrupt you, but the exam could include economic literacy, which seems like an important thing to have as a qualification for being a competent voter, but the correct answers to the economic literacy questions could involve free market ideology. If you disagree with that, then you're marked incompetent, etc.

Jason Brennan: Yeah. One thing for me, I don't think the question here is can we come up with a perfect epistocracy and compare that, and if we can't, then we shouldn't have it. For me it is just, epistocracy is going to be biased and abused, and democracy is as well, so the question is just, of the two ugly pigs we have to choose from, which is the least ugly?

There's lots and lots of stuff on this in the book, and we don't have time to go through it all, but one idea I entertain in the book is ... There's actually a reason to think that we could use a hybrid system in which democracy with universal suffrage gets to choose the voter competence exam, and then you get to vote on the other stuff only if you pass that exam. I give this argument about why I think choosing a criterion of voter competence is actually a pretty easy question which I think democracies could do a pretty decent job doing, but then choosing economic policy is really hard.

A cute analogy I use is, if I ask my five-year-old what makes for a good spouse, he could actually come up with a pretty good theory of what a good spouse is, but then it's actually quite difficult to apply that theory. I think similarly, the average voter has a pretty good intuitive sense of what makes somebody a competent voter. They just happen not to be good at applying that theory to selecting good politicians and so on.

That said, there are some versions of epistocracy that have built-in mechanisms to correct for this. The Mexican philosopher Claudio Lopez-Guerra advocates something called an enfranchisement lottery, in which no one gets the right to vote by default, but 20,000 people are selected at random to then become electors, and they and only they are allowed to vote, but before they actually acquire the right to vote, they have to go through some very, very basic compentence-building exercise. Of course, that's going to be rigged. Of course, people are going to be biased in how they do it, but still, there's reason to think that that might still lead to a higher level of information than just allowing everybody to vote.

The thing that I like to toy with is what I call a government by simulated oracle. That's a system in which everyone's allowed to vote. When they vote, they answer something like the questions that are given on the American National Election Studies, just really basic questions about basic facts, nothing technical like sociology or economics, just the basic facts. You collect their demographic information. When you have those three sets of data, what they vote for, who

they are, and what they know, then any person who's taken statistics can estimate what would happen to that American public if it were able to answer that quiz perfectly and get a high score on it. You do that instead of what the public actually wants.

You might say, "Sure, there's going to be lots of different ways of framing the quiz." You might get slightly different answers. But there's a sense in which yeah, it's under-determined what a perfectly enlightened public would want, but nevertheless even a crummy version of that quiz is going to be more informative and a better bet for what to do than what we actually do, which is to do what the unenlightened public wants.

I think it's really just about don't be too ambitious in what you want epistocracy to do. Even weak or milder forms of it that are less prone to abuse would I think be an improvement upon democracy. What I really want would be all voters to be economically literate, but I know that I can't design a test that would be free of bias that would get that, so let me just ask them basic facts. People who know what the unemployment rate is, maybe their votes count for a little bit more than people who don't.

Julia Galef: Yeah, those are pretty interesting incarnations of the concept of epistocracy. I also want to ... I recognize that in pointing out all the potential flaws in epistocracy, there's this weird asymmetry where democracy has tons of flaws, and so why should we hold this? Maybe it's a status quo bias, where we're just holding alternatives to a much higher standard than the current status quo, and that's unfair or irrational.

The counter to that is: democracy is the least bad of the other options that humanity has tried so far, and maybe we should be pretty conservative in trying to deviate from that, given how bad it's possible things can get.

Jason Brennan: Yeah, that's fair. I end up agreeing with that. I end up thinking that's one of the strongest arguments for sticking with democracy, is something like I think from a philosophical standpoint you might say, I'm trying to convince you philosophically that you should be a pure instrumentalist about government. Whatever government gets the best outcomes, defined independent of procedure, is the form of government you should have.

When it comes to practical policy, I think the Burkean conservative argument's a pretty good one, which is like, "Hey, it's really risky to try something new, so if the status quo seems to be working okay, we should be very cautious about deviating from it." I think on the other hand advocating, "Let's try sort of small-scale experiments with epistocracy, and see what happens and learn from them, and then if it works, we might scale up, and if it doesn't work, we should stop"…

I think for example, I'd rather have Denmark or Switzerland or the state of New Hampshire experiment with epistocratic proposals, because these are relatively non-corrupt governments and relatively well-functioning ones. If they can make it

work, then maybe we can scale it up a little bit, and if they can't make it work, then maybe we shouldn't.

To be honest, I also think this is true of democracy. Democracy doesn't work equally well everywhere. It works really well in some places and really badly elsewhere. What I'd expect is that epistocracy also works best in the places where democracy works best, and it works worst places where democracy works worst.

Julia Galef: Right. You know, I thought you were going to say that we should try epistocracy in Switzerland because it doesn't really matter what they do anyway, so we might as well experiment on that one.

I guess this is probably a good place to wrap up, since we unfortunately have to wrap up, but we'll link to the book. I highly recommend it to listeners of Rationally Speaking. As has become apparent I hope through the discussion, it's full of a lot of really interesting and tightly reasoned arguments, and it also has the nice property of being very well-organized. The arguments are all laid out with clear relationships to each other, and Jason goes through which pieces of the argument imply which other things, and what depends on what else, etc. I benefited a lot from it, and I highly recommend it.

Jason, before we let you go, I want to invite you to introduce the Rationally Speaking pick of the episode, which is a book or blog or article or something else that has influenced your thinking in some way. What's your pick for the episode?

Jason Brennan: I mentioned this book before, Diana Mutz's Hearing The Other Side. It's one of my favorite books on politics. I think you'll learn a tremendous amount about political behavior and how people think about politics. One other interesting fact about it, she asked the question, "Who actually hears the other point of view? Who actually hears points of view with whom they disagree?" It turns out that if you're white, rich, and educated, that predicts you almost never hear points of view with which you disagree, and if you are poor, not white, and uneducated, that predicts you frequently hear points of view with which you disagree.

Julia Galef: Interesting. Great. We'll link to that as well as to your book and to your website. Jason, thanks so much for being on the show. It's been a pleasure.

Jason Brennan: Thanks for having me.

Julia Galef: This concludes another episode of Rationally Speaking. Join us next time for more explorations on the borderlands between reason and nonsense.