Churchill famously noted, “Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others.” In Against Democracy, Brennan wants us to consider epistocracy as an alternative to democracy, so what we can consider which system “work[s] better” (p.8). Which standard should be used to evaluate competing forms of government? Defend your answer with reference to at least three thinkers from the class readings.

Make sure you provide an explicit answer to the question and support that answers with references from the required reading, but do not feel obliged to rely solely on the course readings.

There is no page limit to this essay. I expect explicit answers, properly supported and referenced, in either Norwegian or English. The Blackboard delivery system is anonymous, so I will not be able to see who authors any of the papers. For this reason it is important that you provide your candidate number on the exam (or if you don’t have that, use your student number).

These answers should be delivered electronically to Blackboard before 15:00 on Tuesday 19 September.

SENSORVEILEDNING

Brennan recognized three different criteria/standards that are used to evaluate democratic constitutions: epistemic, aretaic (virtuous) and intrinsic (p.7). When comparing democracies with potential alternatives, Brennan argues for the first (epistemic). In short, Brennan expects some sort of empirical standard (vaguely defined), yet epistocracy has never existed, so it is impossible to test his claims. He could argue in logical/theoretical terms, but he has jettisoned this opportunity in criticizing earlier democratic theorists for being too theoretical, not empirical enough. Hence, he is left with no way to defend his argument, and provides no explicit standard by which to evaluate the two forms of government (except some vague notion of efficiency, due to frequent reference to experts in economics). More problematic still is that the empirical evidence tends to show that when democracies are replaced, they are replaced by authoritarian regimes—so transition from democracy to something other than democracy does not look very promising from an empirical perspective (We have not studied the empirical literature, so I don’t expect students to get this argument; but they should be able to reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of deductive vs inductive forms of proof).

The other authors on the course reading vary significantly on this, and student responses will vary, by author.

Broadly speaking there are two ways to respond to this question, consistent with the main theme of the class:

Protectionist approaches argue that democracy is superior to other forms of government as it limits potential abuses of power (tyranny), with each author varying in focus (e.g., Tocqueville and Mill are worried about tyranny of the majority; The Federalists are worried about the rule of
the tyrant (or a dominant faction)); Weber and Schumpeter are worried about the mob or bureaucrats out of control, and they defend democracy with reference to its ability to provide stability and to control the bureaucracy in a modern society.

Developmental approaches tend to focus on the role that democracy plays in generating a “will of the people”, which, in different forms, becomes the standard by which we should evaluate forms of government. For example, in Marsilius, the idea is to provide governance that reflects the will of people; for Pateman, democratic participation provides us (the people) with psychological development, education, and training; Fishkin et al. look to the role that deliberation can play in refining voter preferences in a way that makes representative government more legitimate and efficient.

There may be those who want to take up the radical flag, by noting the pessimism of Marx and Pateman about any form of government in which underlying forms of inequality are not first resolved. Likewise, the closing lines of Thoreau’s “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience” notes that a free and enlightened state will be one in which “…the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly.”

Another possibility is to distinguish between those authors on the reading list that believe democracy is inherently right, and those that believe democracy is superior at providing some other good (e.g. stability); i.e. that an instrumental standard can be used. This (instrumentalist argument) is akin to what Brennan is proposing—he just wants to put it to the test, so that it is possible to see Brennan as a continuation of the tradition that starts with the Federalists, Weber, and Schumpeter (e.g.).

The question hints at a single standard, but I have suggested (in response to a student query) that more than one standard is acceptable. When this is done, however, it is important that the standards are considered together, as they may point in opposite directions. E.g. if a candidate chooses “deliberation” and “efficiency” as the two standards, but doesn’t prioritize one over the other, then it doesn’t help in resolving Brennan’s query: deliberation often comes at the expense of efficiency, so we need to know which one is to be prioritized when they do come into conflict with one another.

In short, there is a lot that can be done with this question, and what is done depends critically on the authors that are chosen. The best grades should go to those who can justify and reflect on their case selection (which authors) and weave the claims of those authors into a cogent, balanced argument that responds to the question.