**The pragmatist demos and the boundary problem**

Final version of record: *Raisons Politiques* 81 (1) 2021, 39-47

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**Abstract:** The pragmatist argument that a democratic ethos and institutions are in some sense a form of inquiry remains one of the most powerful but elusive themes in its social and political thought. As a term and concept, democracy predates the modern state but the project of justifying democracy is paradigmatically a project of justifying it within and for the modern state. Drawing on Misak and Talisse’s important development of the inquiry argument, this article draws out how the pragmatist epistemic argument breaks with this traditional conception of democratic justification, and how its commitment to the removal of internal obstacles to epistemic inclusion provides general reasons to question political boundaries.

The pragmatist argument that a democratic ethos and institutions are in some sense a form of inquiry remains one of the most powerful but elusive themes in its social and political thought. As a term and concept, democracy predates the modern state but the project of justifying democracy is paradigmatically a project of justifying it within and for the modern state. In a series of influential and important texts, Cheryl Misak and Robert Talisse have worked out the inquiry-based pragmatist argument for democracy clearly and in detail. This article is concerned, not with the foundations but with the implications of this argument: in particular, I seek to draw out how the pragmatist epistemic argument breaks with this traditional conception of democratic justification, and how its commitment to the removal of internal obstacles to epistemic inclusion provides reasons to raise justificatory questions about political boundaries.

The significance of pragmatism for social and political philosophy has been elaborated in a variety of ways.[[1]](#footnote-1) The focus here is only on one prominent route, which has attracted considerable attention, and works out the significance of pragmatism for politics through its conception of inquiry. In their Peircean-inspired project, Misak and Talisse provide the most careful and sophisticated version of this idea.[[2]](#footnote-2) For this perspective, pragmatists can deploy the idea that liberal democratic institutions are reliable instruments to generate true beliefs. Beyond this, more distinctively, they posit a non-instrumental relationship between true beliefs and the practices and institutions of believers. In Misak’s words, ‘the requirements of genuine belief show that we must, broadly speaking, be democratic inquirers’.[[3]](#footnote-3) In outline, in the version of this argument developed by Misak and Talisse, the argument for this relationship runs as follows. What it is to be a true belief is to be one that would stand up to the test of experience, through remorseless exposure to potentially recalcitrant experience. A true belief is one that is responsive to, and best fits with, all reasons, arguments and experience. An authentic, non-specious believer is committed to testing epistemic claims against as wide a range of different experiences as possible, rendering beliefs responsive to reasons and evidence. In particular, this commitment requires us to seek out and attend to different perspectives and arguments, in order to test and, if necessary, revise our current conceptions.[[4]](#footnote-4) From the fact we need access to evidence, arguments, other forms of information, and processes of reason-exchange, it follows that we need to live in a certain sort of canonical social and political order, and should exercise certain epistemic virtues.

A commitment to arriving at and sustaining true beliefs entails that we support a democratic ethos and institutions: as Talisse puts it, ‘democracy is the political entailment – indeed, the political *manifestation* – of the folk epistemic commitments each of us already endorses’.[[5]](#footnote-5) There are features of democracy that instantiate the broader pragmatist commitment to openness to experience. If we want to be truth-seekers, we need to be open to experience and so support these features. In aiming to acquire and stabilise true beliefs, we need to expose them to as wide as possible test of experience. Since this is the case, social hierarchy, snobbishness and refusal to reflect critically on beliefs block the road of inquiry for the pragmatist. For this pragmatist perspective, the ethos, practices and institutions of a democratic society have a particular epistemic character. These include a propensity to resist setting up a priori some authority, treating some group as subservient to another, and to entertaining ideas of natural epistemic hierarchy. Democracy renders political decisions publicly responsible, challengeable, and open to revision, promoting the expression of diverse perspectives. These features of democracy are epistemic for this pragmatist, grounded in our doxastic commitments.

This pragmatist epistemic justification of democracy doesn’t preclude there being equally potent moral and political reasons to support democratic institutions and procedures. However, the argument itself is that ‘each person has compelling epistemological reasons – simply in virtue of the fact that he or she holds beliefs – to embrace social and political norms best secured within a democratic order’.[[6]](#footnote-6) These reasons need appropriate epistemic background conditions to be justified, however, so there is a kind of justificatory priority to the pragmatist epistemic argument.

In the way Misak and Talisse have developed this, justificatory priority provides an independent or neutral justification for democratic principles to someone who is sceptical for moral reasons. For Talisse, ‘the paradox of democratic justification’ derives from the fact that democracy requires agreement among a citizenry combined with the problem of “deep politics,” that is, that citizens in pluralistic societies inevitably and reasonably disagree on fundamental moral matters. In such circumstances of moral division, the argument goes, it is impossible to provide a moral justification of democracy that is justifiable to all citizens, which is what democracy requires.[[7]](#footnote-7) According to Misak, a liberal such as Rawls fails to ‘provide us with an independent or neutral justification of the liberal or democratic virtues’.[[8]](#footnote-8) Rawls’s liberal principles are circular and question-begging, since they lack the normative resources for justifying liberal institutions to those who do not already accept them, such as the Schmittian. The pragmatist epistemic route is allegedly superior to the mainstream liberal alternative, and resolves the democratic paradox, by resting the case for these institutions on epistemic principles and commitments, which are universally shared despite moral disagreement. What motivates the claim to justificatory neutrality is the desire to provide a justification that is persuasive, at least in principle, to someone who both lacks democratic moral or political beliefs, and in any case views moral beliefs as sub-par, and not genuinely cognitive. Accordingly, this is a line of argument that appeals to the commitments entailed by belief as such. The aim is for an independent and neutral justification. Political pluralism and disagreement generate the need for ethical neutrality in justification, and the move to the higher ground of epistemic commitments – higher, as we’ve seen, both in the sense that it provides *neutral* ground and also in its having *priority* over particular ethical positions. The point is not that it will persuade the Schmittian but that it is the kind of consideration that should persuade her – since she has a commitment in being an authentic believer. For the pragmatist, ‘[s]elf-aware epistemic agents – agents whose epistemic practice reflects their epistemic commitments – must uphold the epistemic norms that can be practiced […] only within a democratic political framework’.[[9]](#footnote-9) The alternative is that they admit that they are only specious or inauthentic believers.

For this account a proper understanding of the doxastic commitments implicit in the idea of truth in this pragmatist way of looking at it is meant to have normative significance for social and political institutions. In exploring the character of the commitment democracy that this pragmatist justificatory argument requires or supports, I want to steer around some of the normative debates in political theory that it engages, including the question, raised in Talisse’s work and discussed elsewhere, of how this approach dovetails with Rawlsian political liberalism and with Dewey’s claims for democracy as a way of life.[[10]](#footnote-10) Instead, the focus here is on the critical case for inclusion of all on terms of equality.

This argument is presented as providing an important reason to challenge and reform structures and practices of hierarchy, snobbery and exclusion within a society. As Misak puts it, those ‘who neglect or denigrate the experiences of others because of their gender, skin colour, or sexual orientation are adopting a very bad means for arriving at true and rational beliefs. They can be criticised as failing to aim at truth properly.’[[11]](#footnote-11) A democratic society must genuinely elicit and confront resistances and challenges to its beliefs. This seems to require that this society’s members need to have an equal capacity to press these challenges and that there is an equal openness to each being heard. This in turn requires not only the removal of obstacles to participation but to the distribution of the resources and capabilities for citizens that are needed to press claims equally, alongside cultural and institutional transformations needed to make uptake of diverse perspectives a possibility. While it can be debated how much pragmatists have thought through these requirements,[[12]](#footnote-12) the idea that the pragmatist argument aspires to provide a reason to overcome obstacles to full and equal civic inclusion seems relatively uncontroversial: that’s what makes it an argument for democracy.

Inclusion should also be considered another way, however, in the terms of what’s been called the democratic boundary problem. As David Miller puts it:

Before a democracy can begin to operate, it needs to have a (formal or informal) constitution — for example, there has to be some rule that specifies who is entitled to take part in its proceedings, by voting and so forth. But it cannot self‐constitute: In some way or other, the constitution has to be selected in advance. If that task is handed over to *another* democratic body, however, we immediately run the risk of an infinite regress.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Traditional justifications of democracy struggle to address this problem, since they are generally framed in terms of the promotion of certain values (such as autonomy or equality as well as the kind of epistemic value canvassed here) within a given political community. In the face of this worry, on the one hand, some theorists suggest there may be no answer to this that avoids normative arbitrariness: an ‘enduring embarrassment of democratic theory is that it seems impotent when faced with questions about its own scope [….] A chicken-and-egg problem thus lurks at democracy’s core’.[[14]](#footnote-14) On the other, there have been a number of arguments developed to establish that justificatory arguments for democracy can deliver a determinate answer, or at least orientation, to the boundary problem – that the rationale for democracy also provides a rationale for a particular conception of political inclusion.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Where does the pragmatist justification of democracy under consideration here sit in relation to the boundary problem? There seem to be at least three different possible ways of viewing this relationship:

[1] the pragmatist argument has no implications for the boundary problem;

[2] it allows for boundaries justified by other values, purposes or goals that are not themselves grounded in the pragmatist argument but are compatible with it;

[3] or it implies a certain kind of answer to the boundary problem.

Let’s consider each of these in turn.

The response [1] is that the pragmatist argument has nothing to say about the boundary problem: it is neutral between, for example, a civic nationalist, ethnic or cosmopolitan way of drawing boundaries. It only offers an argument for inclusion, once boundaries are drawn, but has nothing to say about how this happens. For the pragmatist epistemic argument, if we take the boundary of membership as given by a pre-existing national constitution, then it seems to say that, within these constraints, we should seek to expose our beliefs to as wide a range of experience as we can. Our openness to experience then stops at the boundary of the state – equally, whether this is viewed in terms of a geographical frontier or as a matter of inclusion or exclusion from citizenship.

The pragmatist epistemic argument is meant to have some bite in identifying and criticising forms of hierarchy and exclusion from citizenship. A defence of [1] needs to be able to show that external boundaries of civic inclusion aren’t in principle the appropriate subject of this criticism. However, it is difficult to see what resources the argument about doxastic commitments has to draw this distinction. There may in a range of particular cases be functional reasons to restrict the scope of discussion and decision-making in relation to some particular issue. Taking as *given* a boundary in general terms, however, seems like a peculiar position for this pragmatist epistemic argument to adopt. Inscribing the boundary in general, by some standard external to the epistemic argument arbitrarily constrains the scope of experience to which members of the demos *qua* believers are exposed, in precisely the way that the critical argument is meant to identify with respect to race or gender.

A rejoinder to this is that a community could think of itself as epistemically benefiting from the experience and arguments of others without those others being members or fellow citizens. There are two components to this line of argument. The first is that the demands of the pragmatist justificatory argument may be envisaged as only requiring a sufficient level of equality and diversity for robust epistemic testing, and that this standard can be met within bounded political communities. The internal diversity of bounded deliberative democratic liberal societies provides an adequately bracing epistemic environment to meet the pragmatist’s doxastic standards. Second, even within a bounded community, provided that this is open in the right way – with a free press, good internet connection and flourishing scientific communities, perhaps – the society isn’t closed off from the epistemic benefits of experience beyond its contingent borders. So [1] is right in the sense that the pragmatist justification of democracy can still succeed, even if the specific boundaries of inclusion are themselves arbitrary.

The first claim here can come in stronger and weaker versions. In its stronger version, it is the claim that *any* bounded community is adequately diverse to test our experiences in the relevant sense. Its weaker version isn’t the claim that anybounded community is adequately diverse to test our experiences but only that *some* bounded community may be adequate for this purpose. This rejoinder needs the stronger claim to establish [1], the arbitrary character of boundaries in relation to the pragmatist argument, for the weaker claim rejects the idea that boundaries are always irrelevant to the requirements of the doxastic commitments. To the extent that the weaker claim rests on the idea that some boundary regimes can fail to allow a broad enough range of experience, it doesn’t support [1]. The stronger claim seems too strong to be plausible, however, since it requires the belief that no way of drawing boundaries can have adverse epistemic consequences, so that any internally democratic bounded community is compatible with the pragmatist. This seems to require the pragmatist to add to her argument a claim to the effect that the range of the relevant arguments or experience that a believer needs to subject herself to is defined as adequately encompassed within whatever given boundaries there happen to be. But this seems to commit the pragmatist to an extreme methodological conservatism along this dimension, where the critical force of the argument elsewhere derives from a reluctance to restrict the sources from which we can draw epistemically relevant experience and arguments.

While the first part of this response rests on arbitrarily narrowing the scope of relevant experience, the second part of this response seems to subvert the normative implications of the justificatory argument. If the experience argument doesn’t imply a commitment to treating others *as citizens*, without a class of exceptions, then it’s not clear that it provides an argument for *democratic* social and political norms at all. It seems unlikely that the epistemic challenge provided in deliberation is as forceful when the interlocutor is disempowered (of the vote, of the capacity to run for office): if the position is that the quality of epistemic input isn’t significantly degraded in the absence of democratic rights, then the justificatory argument for democracy again seems to evaporate. This kind of response needs to make it clear why this kind of consideration does not apply to classes of those who happen currently to be citizens. If the pragmatist takes the view that we can envisage others as potential epistemic sources in the full sense *without* democratic empowerment seems only to suggest that its conception of our doxastic commitments fall short of justifying democracy, even it offers a much more limited and partial form of civic inclusion in the form of rights to freedom of association, freedom of expression, and other such basic freedom rights.

This leads us to [2]. In thinking about the boundaries of civic inclusion a pragmatist can appeal to other kinds of moral consideration: the inquiry argument doesn’t exhaust her justificatory repertoire. We could think of the pragmatist argument here as providing a justification for democracy as what Ian Shapiro calls a subordinate or conditioning good – one that shapes the terms of social and political interaction but does not determine some of its fundamental goals, values or purposes.[[16]](#footnote-16) And one can then argue that among its fundamental goals, values or purposes is self-government within a bounded political community. So she can appeal to the ‘all affected’ or ‘all subjected’ principles, or to nationalist, pluralist or cosmopolitan principles, and so on, in order to provide the material for a solution to the problem of inclusion. While these principles are independent of the pragmatist inquiry argument and this doesn’t itself provide a principled reason to draw boundaries, it nevertheless provides an argument for inclusiveness within given boundaries. This response, it should be noted, fits with the mixed conception’s thought that our diversity of moral reasons isn’t simply displaced by the pragmatist argument.

These moral reasons are meant to be compatible with the doxastic commitments set out in that argument: beliefs about the goals, values or purposes that furnish the fundamental framework for political interaction aren’t exempt from the justificatory conditions set out the pragmatist argument. If these were to be taken as exempt, then the approach would be toothless against the Schmittian, for whom the existential goals, values and purposes of politics are insulated from discursive critical reasoning. As we’ve seen, however, this defence of democracy claims justificatory priority for the epistemic claims it makes: so the question of what social and political conditions are required for us to adhere to our doxastic commitments can’t be swept under the carpet.

The proposal here, then, is that [3] is the most plausible interpretation of the pragmatist argument we are considering, since it respects the claim that this epistemic argument retains justificatory priority in relation to other moral reasons. How and where boundaries are drawn must be compatible with the doxastic commitments of this pragmatist defence of democracy. This isn’t to say that pragmatism is only compatible with global democratic institutions and that there can’t legitimately be democratic boundaries or compelling reasons to institutionalise different polities. If the pragmatist isn’t to dilute the force of her argument against internal forms of hierarchy and exclusion, then she should scrutinise external exclusion with equal care. Since there is no reason to think that the experience and reasons that we need to be exposed to in order to maintain our doxastic authenticity are uniquely and exhaustively supplied within the borders of the modern state, there is a permanent challenge to any bounded or institutionalised system of civic inclusion and from the pragmatist epistemological argument; the latter always seems positioned to criticise the former. This point can be put another way. If we accept this defence of democracy, then the justification of boundaries needs to be compatible with the conception of democratic procedures and ethos that the defence contains: there is no reason to insulate the normative justification of boundaries from this defence.

The point of this article has been to lay out why we are led in this direction by the pragmatist defence of democracy.[[17]](#footnote-17) There is a lot more to be said about how to understand the boundary question (including how to think of other kinds of inclusion, such as age, future generations, or indeed representations of the non-human) and its significance, which needs further exploration. One conclusion that could be drawn from the foregoing is that this is a kind of *reductio*: if this is the direction that this defence of democracy takes us in, we may think, then it is surely an unworldly and apolitical approach to grappling with knotty problems of political power and institutions. Now there are grounds to think of this pragmatist argument as operating in a fairly rarefied moral and epistemological space.[[18]](#footnote-18) But the fact that it raises a radical challenge for the normative justification of political boundaries isn’t in itself a reason to dismiss it, for this justification is, as we’ve seen, one of the hard questions for democratic theory.

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Abstract

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1. Some synoptic views, which bring out how some of the different ways in which the relationship between pragmatism and political philosophy can be articulated, include Matthew Festenstein, *Pragmatism and Political Theory: From Dewey to Rorty,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997; Robert Talisse, ‘ Pragmatist Political Philosophy’, *Philosophy Compass*. 9: 2, 2014, p. 123-30; Michael Bacon and Clayton Chin, ‘Contemporary Pragmatist Political Theory: Aims and Practices’, *Political Studies Review*, 14: 1, 2016, p. 3-6; Susan Dieleman, David Rondel and Christopher J. Voparil (eds.) *Pragmatism and Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For context, see Matthew Festenstein, ‘Inquiry and Democracy in Contemporary Pragmatism’, *in* Patrick Baert and Bryan Turner (eds.), *Pragmatism and European Social Theory*, Cambridge: Bardwell Press, 2007, p. 115-36. Treatments of different types of inquiry-based argument include Elizabeth Anderson, ‘The Epistemology of Democracy’, *Episteme*, 3:1-2, 2006, p. 8-22; James Bohman, ‘Deliberative Democracy and the Epistemic Benefits of Diversity’, *Episteme*, 3: 3, 2006, p. 175-91; Matthew Festenstein, ‘Does Dewey Have An “Epistemic Argument” for Democracy?’, *Contemporary Pragmatism*, 16: 2-3, 2019, 217-41; Michael I. Raber, *Knowing Democracy – A Pragmatist Account of the Epistemic Dimension in Democratic Politics*, Cham, Switzwerland: Springer, 2020. There is now a large literature specifically on Misak’s and Talisse’s Peircean arguments. In addition to the sources cited below, and discussions in this issue, helpful and important texts on this approach include Eric McGilvray, ‘Democratic Doubts: Pragmatism and the Epistemic Defence of Democracy’, *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 22:1, 2014, p. 105-23; Henrik Rydenfelt, ‘Democracy and Moral Inquiry: Problems of the Methodological Argument’, *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 55: 3, 2019, p. 254-72. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cheryl Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality: Pragmatism and Deliberation*, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cf. Cheryl Misak, ‘Making Disagreement Matter’, *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 18, 2004, p. 9-22, at p. 12, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Robert Talisse, *Democracy and Moral Conflict*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 121, emphasis in original. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cheryl Misak and Robert Talisse, ‘Pragmatist Epistemology and Democratic Theory: A Reply to Eric MacGilvray’, *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 22: 3, 2014, p. 366-76, at p. 373. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Talisse, *Democracy and Moral Conflict*, p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality*, p. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Talisse, *Democracy and Moral Conflict*, p. 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Robert Talisse, *A Pragmatist Philosophy of Democracy*, New York: Routledge, 2007; Matthew Festenstein, ‘Pragmatism, Inquiry and Political Liberalism’, *Contemporary Political Theory*, 9, 2010, p. 29-44; Matthew Festenstein, ‘Unravelling the Reasonable: Comment on Talisse’, *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 45, 2009, p. 55-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality*, p. 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Talisse, ‘Pragmatist Political Philosophy’; Dieleman, Rondel and Voparil (eds.) *Pragmatism and Justice*; David Rondel, *Pragmatist Egalitarianism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. David Miller, ‘Reconceiving the Democratic Boundary Problem’, *Philosophy Compass*, 15: 11, 2020, p. 1-9, at p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ian Shapiro and Casiano Hacker-Cordón, ‘Outer Edges and Inner Edges’, *in* Ian Shapiro and Casiano Hacker-Cordón (eds.), *Democracy’s Edges*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. There is now an extensive literature on this, an earlier iteration of which I discussed in relation to some other pragmatist arguments in Matthew Festenstein, ‘Pragmatism’s Boundaries’, *Millennium*, 31, 2002, p. 549-71, and which now includes, *inter alia*: Arash Abizadeh, ‘On the Demos and Its Kin: Nationalism, Democracy and the Boundary Problem’, *American Political Science Review*, 106: 4, 2012, p. 867-82; Eva Erman, ‘The Boundary Problem and the Idea of Democracy’, *Constellations*, 21, 2014, p. 535-46; Robert Goodin, ‘Enfranchising All Affected Interests and Its Alternatives’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 35, 2007, p. 40-68; Aaron Maltais, Jonas Hultin Rosenberg, and Ludvig Beckman, ‘The Demos and Its Critics’, *Review of Politics*, 81: 3, 2019, p. 435-57; David Miller, ‘Democracy’s Domain’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 37: 3, 2009, 201-28; Sofia Näsström, ‘The Legitimacy of the People’, *Political Theory*, 35, 2007, p. 624-58; David Owen, ‘Constituting the Polity, Constituting the Demos: On the Place of the All Affected Interests Principle in Democracy Theory and In Resolving the Democratic Boundary Problem’, *Ethics and Global Politics*, 5, 2012, p. 129-52; Sarah Song, ‘The Boundary Problem in Democratic Theory: Why the Demos Should be Bounded by the State’, *International Theory*, 4, 2012, p. 39-68. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ian Shapiro, *Democratic Justice*, Yale: Yale University Press, 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. While I have focused on one strand of pragmatist epistemic argument, this kind of tension between particular political communities/sovereign states and what seems like the inherently cosmopolitan space of scientific inquiry seems not just to apply to this argument alone. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See Matthew Festenstein, ‘Pragmatism, Realism and Moralism’, *Political Studies Review*, 14: 1, 2014, p. 39-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)