**“Technocracy,” democracy ... and corruption and trust**

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# Abstract

Mutual distrust between experts and ordinary citizens –manifest in the wake of the Brexit referendum, the rise of the Tea Party and the election of Donald Trump– is not new. But it takes on particular urgency in an age when ill-informed “populist” policies on issues such as climate change may cause irreparable damage. This article examines the viability of Bruce Gilley’s 2017 attempt to resolve the conflict between “technocracy” and democracy. Gilley's solution relies on the objective qualities of a policy to assign it to its appropriate "sphere": highly technical problems are best addressed by experts, while those marked by technical uncertainty can be handled by democracy.

This article argues that such a solution will not be stable under current political conditions. We must recognize that various forms of corruption of expertise have contributed to today's populist reaction against experts. The challenge of reforming expertise and mitigating mistrust of experts is a "divergent" problem, which requires ongoing balancing, and does not admit of a once-and-for-all solution.

**Keywords**

technocracy

experts

populism

corruption

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In Henrik Ibsen’s 1882 play, *An enemy of the people*, Dr. Stockmann discovers contamination of the water supply leading to the public baths. He is sure that the mayor will “be very glad that such an important truth has been brought to light” (rpt. 1999, 14). Not so. The doctor learns that knowledge cannot be translated directly into policy: the public must first be persuaded. He comes to share the frustration of all those who have searched for ways to make public opinion less “meddlesome,” as Woodrow Wilson once put it (rpt. 1987, 21). As the play goes on, the doctor’s frustration sparks a chilling contempt for ordinary citizens: “All who live by lies ought to be exterminated like vermin!” (Ibsen 1999, 64). Not surprisingly, all the “right-minded citizens” of the town turn on him (72).

The mutual distrust between experts and ordinary citizens –manifest in the wake of the Brexit referendum, the rise of the Tea Party and the election of Donald Trump– is not new. But it takes on particular urgency in an age when ill-informed “populist” policies on issues such as climate change may cause irreparable damage.

This paper will examine the viability of Bruce Gilley’s 2017 attempt to resolve the conflict between “technocracy” and democracy. The first section will clarify the issue by addressing an ambiguity in Gilley’s concept of technocracy. We will then consider Gilley’s diagnosis and prescription for the technocracy-democracy conflict. Because Gilley wishes to draw on Jonathan Haidt’s concept of “sanctity,” the third section notes some dangers of that move, in particular the possibility that respect for a social institution may be betrayed by actors within it. This sets the stage for the core section of the paper, concerning the corruption of expertise.[[1]](#footnote-1) The paper concludes with some thoughts on the complex nature of the expert/democracy problem.

**1** Technocracy?

Gilley’s article opens with a controversial decision of the government of Singapore to proceed with casino development. The case is an interesting one. But in what sense does it represent for Gilley an example of technocracy? Is it because of the nature of Singapore’s political system? Or because the government chose a policy opposed by a majority of the public, apparently after having consulted experts? Given that Gilley’s subsequent case for technocracy points to the supposed shortcomings of *American* public opinion, we must infer that “technocracy” for Gilley consists of a situation in which the government pays more heed to expert than to public opinion. Despite his having offered an etymology-based definition of technocracy as “rule by the skilled” (Gilley 2017, 10), Gilley’s actual use of the term parallels the loose usage of “bureaucracy” today.

The problem of technocracy and democracy as posed by Gilley thus comes down to this: when should elected leaders rely primarily on expert advice for their policy decisions, and when should they be guided instead by the current views of citizens? Thus restated, the problem can be seen to be an old one. So too is the solution offered by representative government: decisions are made after deliberation that should “refine and enlarge the public views,” as James Madison put it (Hamilton, Jay, and Madison rpt. 1937, 59). As democracies have adapted to the modern age, the deliberation by Madison’s “chosen body of citizens” has increasingly been aided by expert advice. Still, if citizens disagree strongly enough with decisions, they can “throw the bums out” at the subsequent election. This arrangement has worked well in certain times and places, but is clearly vulnerable to populist attack.

**2** The conflict, and Gilley’s solution

The conflict between technocracy and democracy arises, in Gilley’s view, because each has a tendency to overstep its bounds. On the one hand, technocrats can “assume goals that are not shared by the wider public” (Gilley 2017, 15). Democracy, for its part, can lead to problematic policies, particularly on matters concerning which citizens are ill-informed. I will focus for the moment on the imperialist tendency of democracy in particular.

The problem of democracy is that on many policy questions “citizens are consistently and clearly wrong” (Gilley 2017, 16). “Only about a third of the adult population,” for example, “believes that global warming is happening and that it is caused mainly by humans” (16). Two other issues concerning which Gilley believes citizens to be ignorant are the effects of minimum wage laws, and the safety of genetically modified foods (16, 14). Thus, on issues such as these, expert advice will yield better policies than the voice of the citizenry.

To tame the technocracy-democracy conflict, Gilley draws on “two of Haidt’s moral intuitions—sanctity and care.” We need to respect “the sanctity of pluralism in every political community” and sustain “an ethic of care for this pluralism in making public policy choices” (Gilley 2017, 18). The pluralism in question requires that both democracy and technocracy respect each other’s spheres of action. For Gilley, the objective qualities of particular policy issues should determine the sphere to which they are assigned. Issues characterized by high technical complexity, such as monetary policy, are best handled by “technocracy.” Issues involving “a high degree of technocratic uncertainty and high stakes for the public” can be addressed by democratic means (Gilley 2017, 19).

**3** Sanctity and its dangers

Haidt presents his concept of sanctity in a work of moral psychology, not philosophy. Thus, his analysis is primarily descriptive rather than prescriptive: it is a *fact*, he argues, that our moral intuitions are richer than a narrow focus on “harm and fairness” can recognize. The prescriptive use of sanctity urged by Gilley raises two interrelated questions: what sort of things (1) *can* and (2) *should* people treat as sacred? Haidt himself points to political uses of the sanctity intuition that should give us pause: it can support xenophobia (2012, 149) and homophobia (156).

But I will focus here on an aspect of sanctity that is immediately relevant to the citizen-expert problem, and proceed by way of an analogy. Consider the worldwide sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic church (in particular). From many perspectives, both religious and secular, the sexual abuse of a child is not only a grave act of injustice, but a violation of something sacred: the inviolability of a vulnerable human being. But we repeatedly hear of cases where children tried to tell adults about what was happening to them, and were either not believed, or simply told to keep quiet. Both individual priests and the church in general enjoyed the protection of an aura of sanctity, which was not warranted in a situation where some church officials were trampling on the sacred, and other officials were covering up this fact. The unwarranted respect for the assumed sanctity of religious institutions did great damage to many human beings, and ultimately to the church itself.

**4** Expertise and its corruption

Let us now develop the analogy to the social role of experts. What “sanctity” do experts need to respect? Consider a specific relationship: what do we assume when we trust the advice of our doctor? Key assumptions are that:

•They have medical expertise in general, and in the specific matter on which they are advising;

•They have brought that expertise to bear in this case: they are neither rushed nor inattentive;

•They are not motivated by considerations other than our health: they have not been influenced by drug company inducements, for example.

This can serve, *mutatis mutandis*, as a template for warranted trust of experts in general, and the sanctity that experts need to respect can easily be deduced from these grounds for trust. As with the authority of the church, we are all better off if the authority of experts is closely tied to their own respect for the form of sanctity relevant to them.

To talk of “sanctity” in relation to expertise will strike some readers as bizarre. But Gilley is correct to bring the concept into the discussion: society needs experts with a strong sense that it is *profoundly* wrong to betray their trust. This strong sense is all the more important given the powerful incentives to betrayal.

For some experts, presenting as objective truth opinions that have been influenced or even purchased by financial backers can be a highly lucrative sideline. Thus, for example, a *New York Times* “examination of 75 think tanks found an array of researchers who had simultaneously worked as registered lobbyists, members of corporate boards or outside consultants in litigation and regulatory disputes, with only intermittent disclosure of their dual roles.” The *Times* reported that “even members of Congress say they are frequently unaware of the financial ties between industries and the witnesses with think tank titles appearing before them at hearings” (Lipton, Confessore and Williams 2016). Influence such as this brings to mind Michael Walzer’s comment that “The dominance of capital outside the market makes capitalism unjust” (1983, 315). Clearly, the argument that democracy should not trample on the sphere of expertise is undermined when corporate interests do just that.

Keeping the problem of expert corruption in mind, let us return to Gilley’s three examples of citizen ignorance, to assess whether they reflect a problem of democracy, technocracy, or both.

**4.1** GMOs

On GMOs, Gilley notes that “in a 2015 survey, the Pew Research Center found a 51% point gap (88% of scientists vs. 37% of the public) in beliefs about whether genetically modified foods are safe to eat” (2017, 14). The argument is a curious one. The Pew study is based on “surveys of citizens and a representative sample of scientists connected to the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS)” (2015, 5). The scientists polled are *not* experts on the topic, but scientists in general, and the near totality of them have no more expertise on the question than a layperson. Gilley’s use of the survey illustrates the “halo effect,” in which a person’s expertise in a very specific field lends credence to their views elsewhere.

The scientist statistic thus reflects, not expert opinion, but scientists’ disposition to trust other scientists. It this trust warranted or not? Perhaps, but here too the conflict of interest problem rears its head. Krimsky and Schwab examined the makeup of an expert panel that produced a 2016 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine report on the safety of genetically engineered crops. They found that, of twenty panel members, six “had one or more reportable financial COIs [conflicts of interest], none of which were disclosed in the report” (2017).

Does this matter? In 2005, the *New York Times* reported that “Ten of the 32 government drug advisers who last week endorsed continued marketing of the huge-selling pain pills Celebrex, Bextra and Vioxx have consulted in recent years for the drugs’ makers, according to disclosures in medical journals and other public records.” Eight of the ten responded to a request for an interview, and all said that “their past relationships with the drug companies had not influenced their votes” (Harris and Berenson 2005). This claim provides a handy null hypothesis. In the case of Vioxx, which was eventually removed from the market after being associated with tens of thousands of additional cases of serious heart disease in the U.S., the vote broke down thus:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | Vote on Vioxx | |
|  |  | Continue approval | Remove from market |
| Company ties? | Yes | 9 | 1 |
| No | 8 | 14 |

A simple chi-square test finds that the probability of seeing an outcome like this, were company ties unrelated to votes, is 0.0048. We can safely reject the null hypothesis: corporate ties clearly *can* influence expert assessments.

None of this, of course, shows that GMOs are *not* safe. But it does help explain mistrust of scientists’ assurances on the issue. A more recent Pew Research study found that “Some three-in-ten Americans say that research findings about GM foods are often influenced by the researchers’ desires to help their industries” (Funk and Kennedy 2016).

**4.2** Minimum wages

Gilley claims that Bryan Caplan’s *The myth of the rational voter* “catalogs dozens of issues on which American citizens beliefs about economic policy issues are flatly wrong, such as the belief that minimum wage laws have no effect on employment levels (Caplan 2007) when the consensus of economists is that they do” (2017, 16). Having reviewed Caplan’s book, I cannot find any claim concerning citizens’ views on the employment impact of minimum wages. He does write: “Why are inefficient policies like the minimum wage popular? Voters’ rational ignorance: few bother to learn enough economics to understand the policies’ drawbacks” (Caplan 2007, 96).

Here we find a distinct problem of expertise: ideologically-motivated intellectual sloppiness. Caplan leaps from the alleged inefficiency of minimum wages to the view that their popularity can be explained by “ignorance.” He has snuck in the assumption that efficiency must trump all other policy objectives. The problem is not that he makes a normative assumption: policy arguments must often do so. But Caplan fails to *argue* for it.

Returning to Gilley’s claim, which concerns employment rather than efficiency: let us grant for the sake of argument that, in a static analysis, an increase in the minimum wage can reduce employment. Important questions remain: by *how much* is employment reduced? Is the policy nevertheless a desirable one?[[2]](#footnote-2) Can other policies compensate for any employment effect? Will the static effect be counteracted by economic dynamics?

Citizens’ support for minimum wage increases, then, is not a strike against democracy. To the contrary, the dogmatism of some experts on the question constitutes another stain on the image of “technocracy.”

**4.3** Climate change

Gilley correctly notes that there is a sharp divide between American public and expert opinion on climate change: “only about a third of the adult population believes that global warming is happening and that it is caused mainly by humans” (2017, 16). Recall, however, that technocracy for Gilley does not entail that experts *rule*, but that leaders heed their counsel, which has only sporadically occurred on the climate issue. So neither democracy nor technocracy come off well in this case: much public opinion is misguided, while expert opinion often goes unheeded.

This points to another crucial barrier to effective policy action, in the United States at least: the sources of funding for congressional elections, which has gradually squeezed sensible climate opinion out of the Republican caucus (Davenport and Lipton 2017). One might think that the problem here is that campaign backers are themselves part of the uninformed public, but as the revelations from Exxon have shown, those funding opposition to climate action need not be suffering themselves from erroneous beliefs (Kaiser and Wasserman 2016).

The first two policy issues adduced by Gilley as evidence of the deficiencies of democracy point in fact to different forms of corruption of expertise: material conflicts of interest, ideological preferences masquerading as firm scientific opinion, and the halo effect, in which expertise in one area is used to claim authority elsewhere. How widespread are these problems? How representative are they of expertise in general? The sad truth is that this may not matter: these phenomena create grounds for an unfair, undiscerning, yet understandable mistrust of experts *in general*, and thus impede a peaceful coexistence between democracy and technocracy.

The difficulty is exacerbated when we consider climate change. The irony here is that “deep pockets” have used the mistrust of experts that they have helped create in order to protect their own interests. Professional climate skeptic Christopher Monckton, for example, claims that “Some of your rent-seeking, scientific-technological elite, taking willful and shameless advantage of the taxpayer’s largesse and of the scientific illiteracy that is now widespread, are mightily enriching themselves by misleading your Congress into appropriating disproportionately large sums to permit them to address the non-problem of anthropogenic ‘global warming’” (U.S. House 2009).

A relatively small number of climate skeptics, generously supported by a range of corporate interests,[[3]](#footnote-3) have been able to *neutralize* policy expertise, at least in the United States. That is, it has not been necessary for corporate funders to win the policy argument, in order to forestall decisive action. They have succeeded merely by producing a “Who knows what to believe?” mentality among many citizens, and outright hostility to climate science among others.

Again, the generalized suspicion of expertise is extremely unfair. But it is easy to understand. Ordinary citizens, after all, are not “experts about experts”: they do not come equipped with the discernment required to separate wheat from chaff in the world of experts and pseudo-experts. They are also, of course, subject to the universal human tendency to believe what one wants to believe.[[4]](#footnote-4)

So suspicion of expertise is unfair, but predictable. More importantly, if it is not addressed, if leaders justify their decisions on the basis of recommendations from widely mistrusted experts, we are sowing the seeds of populist fury. And the whirlwinds that can result are not pretty.

**5** The way forward?

Given widespread public suspicion of experts, no simple technical solution of the sort Gilley advocates, based upon the objective qualities of different policy issues, will be stable. What, then, is the way forward? That is not clear. Public suspicion of conflicts of interest can be mitigated with tighter rules on the ways in which experts of various sorts can make a living, or at least rules imposing transparency. The American Economic Association’s disclosure policy, for example, requires economists to declare various types of potential conflict of interest when submitting articles to AEA journals. Going further, “The AEA urges its members and other economists to apply the above principles in other publications: scholarly journals, op-ed pieces, newspaper and magazine columns, radio and television commentaries, as well as in testimony before federal and state legislative committees and other agencies” (2012).

But it is also clear that rules are not enough. To return to the analogy with the Catholic Church: obviously, strong rules were in place, in both secular and canon law. But the rules did not prevent abuse. One problematic factor was the silence of colleagues and superiors of abusers, who presumably experienced some conflicting emotional and normative commitments. Analogously, conflicting commitments can sometimes undermine the internal enforcement of standards by any body of experts.[[5]](#footnote-5) Nonprofit organizations that monitor the webs of financing of experts can perhaps play an important role in holding many experts to standards of transparency.

But conflicts of interest are just one factor contributing to public mistrust of experts. Other problems include the ideological dogmatism we saw manifested concerning minimum wage policy. That dogmatism is closely linked to a problematic blending of factual analysis and normative commitments, around trade policy, for example.[[6]](#footnote-6) A political danger of such blending is that experts may simply ignore the legitimate interests of sectors of the population, who can strike back in the voting booth.[[7]](#footnote-7)

This problem is much harder to address than conflicts of interest: we are not endowed with a magical ability to identify all our own biases and drop them in cold storage. Karl Popper hoped that “other people, fortunately, will supply the criticism for us if we fail to supply it ourselves” (rpt. 2002, xix). This can occur, *if* a particular area of expertise is marked by serious pluralism, and *if* dissenting voices are not brushed aside. The serious debates among experts that can result from that pluralism, of course, may allow some citizens to stick with the “Who knows what to believe?” passivity mentioned above.

The relation between experts and democracy is thus not a simple problem that allows for a neat-and-tidy solution. If we reflect upon the qualities of an ideal relation between experts and citizens, we can see that the way forward requires the pursuit of various goals that are in tension with one another. An ideal relation would be marked by, among other things:

•A culture of serious debate among experts in any given field;

•Honest communication by experts with the public, acknowledging possible conflicts of interest, and distinguishing areas of strong consensus from less certain ones;

•The wisdom in the public at large to recognize that, in many cases, some uncertainty is not an argument for inaction[[8]](#footnote-8);

•An alignment between the degree of public respect for individual experts and their own respect for the requirements of honest and objective expertise; thus also

•Citizens who do not simply favor experts who tell them what they want to hear.

We can see from this short list that the ideal relation requires a certain culture of expertise, *and* a culture of citizenship. Ideally, citizens as a whole need to find the “sweet spot” on a spectrum running from blind trust to hyper-skepticism, from undiscriminating acceptance of expert views to blanket dismissal.

But in our all-too-human world, “sweet spots” are rarely found once and for all. The relation between experts and democracy is thus an example of what E.F. Schumacher termed a “divergent,” as opposed to “convergent,” problem (1974, 79-81).[[9]](#footnote-9) With the latter type, such as a crossword puzzle, work can converge upon a satisfactory and complete solution. For “divergent” problems, however, a complete and stable solution is not attainable, because the problem involves an ongoing balancing of values in tension. In raising children, for example, parents may seek to inculcate both a critical spirit and a respect for legitimate authority. Schumacher suggests that “The true problems of living - in politics, economics, education, marriage, etc. - are always problems of overcoming or reconciling opposites” (1974, 81). As it is a divergent problem, the challenge of the democracy-expert relation will be ongoing, a matter of rectifying different sorts of imbalances as they arise. And they *will* continually arise.

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1. Throughout this paper, “corrupt” is a broader concept than “illegal.” In the case of expertise, a useful working definition can draw on the traditional criterion of publicness: An act is corrupt if, were it publicly known, it would legitimately diminish the authority of the actor (see Kant rpt. 1991, 126). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. One might believe, for example, that the distributional benefits of a minimum wage increase outweigh employment or efficiency considerations. Or one might view the issue as a matter of basic justice: “Why should someone work full time, year-round, and not make enough to pay for rent and other basics?” (Ehrenreich 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Pat Michaels, for example, received money from: Western fuels, the German Coal Mining Association, Edison Electric, and Cyprus minerals, all of which came to light only when he was put under oath (Gelbspan 1997, 41). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This helps explain the influence of global warming skeptics. As George Monbiot notes, “people listen to this nonsense because the alternative is to accept what no one wants to believe” (2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Adam Smith’s analysis of university governance offered a cautionary observation on the limits of collective self-regulation: “If the authority to which he is subject resides in the body corporate, the college, or university, of which he himself is a member, and in which the greater part of the other members are, like himself, persons who either are, or ought to be teachers, they are likely to make a common cause, to be all very indulgent to one another, and every man to consent that his neighbour may neglect his duty, provided he himself is allowed to neglect his own” (rpt. 1937, 718). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The argument here is certainly not that policy analysis should be “value-free.” The point is rather that, as Robert Dahl put it, “the clandestine smuggling of moral values into the social sciences” should be replaced by “open and honest commerce” (1947, 1-2). A corollary of this is that value claims, as much as empirical ones, should be subject to rigorous scrutiny. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. When citizens *do* strike back, we cannot reasonably expect them to demonstrate laser-like precision in their choice of targets. They will respond to cues from those political leaders who they believe are (finally) talking to *them*. In both the Brexit referendum and the Trump election, anger at economic marginalization was linked to xenophobia. (In both cases, of course, many voters were moved by other considerations.) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. As Lewandowsky et al note with regard to climate debates, “Appeals to uncertainty are so pervasive in political and lobbying circles that they have attracted scholarly attention under the name ‘scientific certainty argumentation methods’, or ‘SCAMs’ for short” (2015, 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Schumacher credits G.N.M. Tyrrell for the concepts. But Schumacher’s use of them is far more fruitful, and has much more significance for the policy world, than Tyrrell’s own (e.g. 1952). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)