



**INFORMED CHOICES, INCLUSIVE VOICES: EPISTEMIC JOURNEYS IN DEMOCRATIC DECISION MAKING**

# **POPULISTS AND DEWEYITES**



**EPISTEMIC DEMOCRACY THROUGH THE POLITICAL SCIENCE LENS**

Adrian Haret  
[a.haret@lmu.de](mailto:a.haret@lmu.de)

May 27, 2024

JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU

The law is a public and solemn declaration of the  
general will on an object of common interest.



JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU

The law is a public and solemn declaration of the general will on an object of common interest.



WILLIAM H. RIKER

There's no such thing as a general will!

Riker, William H. (1982). *Liberalism Against Populism*. San Francisco: W. H. Freeman.

JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU

The law is a public and solemn declaration of the general will on an object of common interest.



WILLIAM H. RIKER

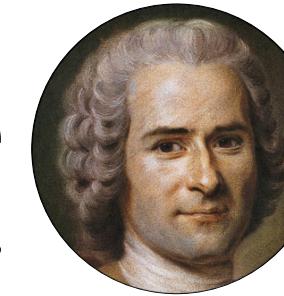
There's no such thing as a general will!

Because of social choice.

Riker, William H. (1982). *Liberalism Against Populism*. San Francisco: W. H. Freeman.

JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU

The law is a public and solemn declaration of the general will on an object of common interest.



WILLIAM H. RIKER

There's no such thing as a general will!

Because of *social choice*.

Riker, William H. (1982). *Liberalism Against Populism*. San Francisco: W. H. Freeman.

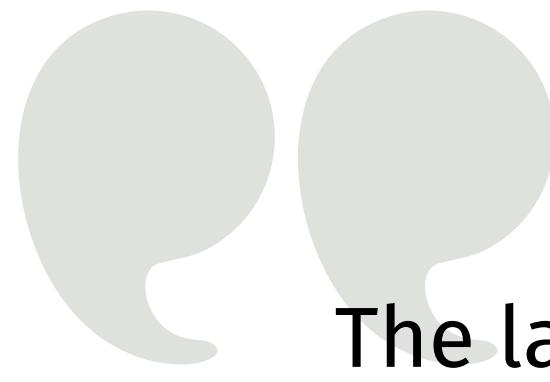
JOSHUA COHEN

Well maybe we can think of it in epistemic terms, as some sort of ideal that group decisions are trying to approximate.



Cohen, J. (1986). *An Epistemic Conception of Democracy*. Ethics, 97(1), 26–38.

Let's unpack this.



The law is the expression of the general will. All citizens have the right to contribute personally, or through their representatives, to its formation. It must be the same for all, whether it protects or punishes.

Déclaration des droits de l'Homme et du citoyen, 1789

DIDEROT

Everything you conceive, everything you contemplate, will be good, great, elevated, sublime, if it accords with the *general and common interest*.



There is no quality essential to your species apart from that which you demand from all your fellow men to ensure your happiness and theirs...

[D]o not ever lose sight of it, or else you will find that your comprehension of the notions of goodness, justice, humanity and virtue grow dim.

Say to yourself often, “I am a man, and I have no other truly inalienable natural rights except those of humanity.”

What does social choice have to do with anything?

CONDORCET

Majority rule can produce preference cycles.





KENNETH ARROW  
These can't be avoided, even if we use some other  
(reasonable) voting rule.

CONDORCET

Majority rule can produce preference cycles.



CONDORCET

Majority rule can produce preference cycles.



KENNETH ARROW

These can't be avoided, even if we use some other  
(reasonable) voting rule.

WILLIAM H. RIKER

There you go. The group can't be thought of as a  
rational agent with a 'will'.





JOSHUA COHEN

**Not so fast!**

JOSHUA COHEN

... one version of populism that survives Riker's criticism has a two-tier structure.



The general will is characterized in terms of an ideal procedure of deliberation or collective choice...

while democratic decision making is construed as an imperfect procedure which, when suitably organized, has the property of providing evidence about how best to achieve the object of the general will.

Cohen, J. (1986). *An Epistemic Conception of Democracy*. Ethics, 97(1), 26–38.

This is (maybe) how Rousseau et al originally intended the notion  
of a general will.

JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU

As long as several men assembled together consider themselves as a single body, they have only one will which is directed towards their common preservation and general well-being.



Then, all the animating forces of the state are vigorous and simple, and its principles are clear and luminous; it has no incompatible or conflicting interests; the common good makes itself so manifestly evident that only common sense is needed to discern it.

Peace, unity and equality are the enemies of political sophistication. Upright and simple men are difficult to deceive precisely because of their simplicity; stratagems and clever arguments do not prevail upon them, they are not indeed subtle enough to be dupes.

How do we get to this general will, i.e., what's best for everyone?



F. A. HAYEK  
Let's set up a market!



ELIZABETH ANDERSON

**Well, for problems that require collective action  
within the bounds of the law, we're better off with  
debate and voting.**

Anderson, E. (2006). The epistemology of democracy. *Episteme*, 3, 8–22.

How do we organize this?

CONDORCET

Votes! Votes for everything!





CONDORCET

Votes! Votes for everything!

ELIZABETH ANDERSON  
Not dynamic enough...

CONDORCET

Votes! Votes for everything!



ELIZABETH ANDERSON

Not dynamic enough...

SCOTT E. PAGE

Diverse problem solvers!



CONDORCET

Votes! Votes for everything!



ELIZABETH ANDERSON

Not dynamic enough...

SCOTT E. PAGE

Diverse problem solvers!



ELIZABETH ANDERSON

Not there yet...

CONDORCET

Votes! Votes for everything!



ELIZABETH ANDERSON

Not dynamic enough...

SCOTT E. PAGE

Diverse problem solvers!



ELIZABETH ANDERSON

Not there yet...

JOHN DEWEY

A trial and error process in which everyone is allowed to participate.



CONDORCET

Votes! Votes for everything!



ELIZABETH ANDERSON

Not dynamic enough...

SCOTT E. PAGE

Diverse problem solvers!



ELIZABETH ANDERSON

Not there yet...

JOHN DEWEY

A trial and error process in which everyone is allowed to participate.



ELIZABETH ANDERSON

Sounds better!



BINA AGARWAL

**Kind of the community forestry groups (CFGs) in India and Nepal work!**