Political epistemology is a newly thriving field at the intersection of epistemology and political philosophy, but it has old roots. In the *Republic*, Plato attacked the epistemic merits of democracy in favor of rule by the knowers. In *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill touted the epistemic benefits of deliberation for citizens; in his *Considerations on Representative Government*, he advocated for plural voting for those with more education in order to improve the quality of political decisions. In “Truth and Politics,” Hannah Arendt analyzed the relationship between truth and political freedom. In *Political Liberalism*, John Rawls put the question of deep political disagreements at the center of his inquiry, ultimately arguing that cooperation across disagreements requires setting aside debates about the truth of particular views and instead adopting an agnostic epistemological position. Political philosophers reacted to Rawls by further debating the role that truth, epistemic justification, and the epistemic quality of decisions should play in establishing the legitimacy of democracy.

While thinkers have been interested in topics at the intersection of political philosophy and epistemology at least since ancient Greece, the past few years have witnessed an outpouring of new research in this area. For example, new work has been published on propaganda, fake news, belief polarization, political disagreement, conspiracy theories, the epistemic merits of (and challenges to) democracy, voter ignorance, irrationality in politics, intellectual virtues and vices in political thinking, distrust, the role of experts in a democracy, and the epistemic harms of filter bubbles and echo chambers.

This rush of interest was largely sparked by two major events: the UK Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump. But the themes that motivate this new research are deeper and more epistemological. For instance, it has become increasingly difficult to discern legitimate sources of evidence, misinformation spreads faster and farther than ever, and there is a widely felt sense—rightly or wrongly—that the role of truth in politics has decayed in recent years. It is therefore no coincidence that political discourse is currently saturated with epistemic notions like “post-truth,” “fake news,” “epistemic bubbles,” and “alternative facts.” Now more than ever there is a need to bring together foundational discussions of truth, knowledge, democracy, polarization, pluralism, and related issues. This handbook attempts to do just that.

Although scholars have been busy charting new ways in which epistemological considerations can (and should) figure into contemporary discussions about politics, this work
has been largely fragmented into individual discussions. For example, while discussions of political disagreement between citizens have taken center stage in political philosophy since Rawls's *Political Liberalism*, discussions of disagreement in epistemology often proceed independently of the literature in political philosophy. Conversely, the political philosophy literature on reasonable disagreement often continues to develop without integrating the large body of recent epistemological work on disagreement. In addition, social epistemologists have been writing about the social dimensions of knowledge, the reliability of testimony, group belief, etc., but these discussions have been largely unconnected to distinctively political concerns.

This handbook explores ways in which the analytic and conceptual tools of epistemology bear on political philosophy, and vice versa. A premise underlying the selection of themes and chapters for this handbook is that, beyond a certain point, progress on certain foundational issues in political philosophy cannot be achieved without attending to the epistemological questions raised by them, nor can epistemology be fully valuable unless it addresses urgent social and political issues. This handbook aims to promote more cross-pollination of ideas, as well as consolidate new work in political epistemology, by bringing political philosophers and epistemologists into direct conversation. As an overview of the landscape, this handbook also aims to provide students and scholars with an up-to-date, accurate, and comprehensive idea of the topics, questions, and problems in political epistemology.

Finally, we also believe that political epistemology offers exciting opportunities for interdisciplinary work at the intersection of philosophy and psychology, economics, political science, communication science, and sociology. This is why this handbook includes a few chapters that summarize empirical research on, for instance, political polarization, voter knowledge, and cognitive bias. When political epistemology aims to contribute to debates in society about the role of truth and knowledge in politics, it cannot do so without paying careful attention to empirical information. At the same time, empirical research can benefit from the conceptual toolbox and rigor of philosophical reflection. This can refine ongoing empirical research projects as well as generate new lines of inquiry.

**Overview of the parts**

This handbook includes 41 chapters that are organized into the following seven parts:

- Politics and truth: historical and contemporary perspectives
- Political disagreement and polarization
- Fake news, propaganda, misinformation
- Ignorance and irrationality in politics
- Epistemic virtues and vices in politics
- Democracy and epistemology
- Trust, expertise, and doubt.

Political epistemology includes a diverse range of topics, so these categories are not intended to be exhaustive, but they do cover a large amount of work in the emerging field of political epistemology. By carving up the terrain in this way, we hope to give some meaningful shape to this broad and rich area of scholarship. (It is worth noting that we decided not to include a part about epistemic injustice in this handbook. While this is no doubt an important area of political epistemology, we wanted to avoid significant overlap with two other recent handbooks: the *Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, edited by José Medina, Ian James Kidd,
and Gail Pohlhaus Jr., and the *Routledge Handbook of Feminist Philosophy of Science*, edited by Sharon Crasnow and Kristen Intemann.)

Each part begins with a brief introduction to the relevant area of work, followed by five to seven chapters on more specific themes. Each chapter has been written for a general audience and presupposes no detailed knowledge of the area. Nearly all the chapters have been newly written for this volume, making this book an entirely new contribution to the emerging field of political epistemology.

In the remainder of this introduction, we will briefly map out the terrain of political epistemology by outlining the seven themes around which this handbook centers. While this division of parts is inevitably somewhat artificial (there is much overlap across these parts), we believe these categories broadly capture the dominant topics in contemporary political epistemology. We think this way of dividing up the terrain lends a natural unity to seemingly diverse areas of scholarship, and we expect the chapters in this volume speak to one another across a variety of issues. We anticipate the collection will open up fruitful new avenues of research by ensuring a robust discussion between political philosophers and epistemologists, but also more broadly between philosophers and empirical disciplines studying politics such as political science, communication science, psychology, and sociology.

### Part 1: Politics and truth: historical and contemporary perspectives

The handbook starts by exploring the fraught relationship between politics and truth from both historical and contemporary perspectives. The first three chapters, by Tamer Nawar, Chris Fraser, and Anthony Booth, trace several ways in which political philosophy and epistemology have intersected in the philosophical thought of ancient Greece, early Chinese political theory, and medieval Islamic philosophy. For example, ancient Greek philosophers were often critical of the epistemic features of democratic institutions, as revealed by the work of Plato and hellenistic thinkers such as the Stoics. In contrast, ancient Chinese thinkers seemed to ground the legitimacy of political authority in a sophisticated social epistemology. In the medieval era, Islamic philosophers wrestled with issues concerning the role and function of expertise in politics, which is a hotly debated contemporary issue. Jumping forward to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Paul Kelly and Yasemin Sari explore the political epistemology of John Stuart Mill and Hannah Arendt, respectively. Mill defends free speech, deliberation, and liberalism on largely epistemic grounds: public debate provides citizens with “the opportunity of exchanging error for truth,” and even unpopular opinions can improve and develop our political ideas, without which our “mental development is cramped” (ibid: 39). Yet Arendt worried that truth has a “coercive” or “despotic” power that threatens to stifle political debate. Her anxiety about truth is closely connected to the alleged rise of “post-truth” politics, which is the focus of chapters by Simon Blackburn and Amanda Greene. They explore questions like: What are the defining traits of post-truth politics, if any? What are its underlying causes? And what is the relationship between postmodernism and post-truth?

### Part 2: Political disagreement and polarization

Political debates are becoming increasingly polarized in Western democracies. Citizens have highly unfavorable views of each other, often regarding each other as immoral, stupid, lazy, and even threatening to each other’s way of life. The chapters in this part explore the causes, consequences, and possible antidotes to political polarization and intractable disagreement in politics.
Several chapters trace the origins of increasing polarization and partisan animosity to the role of social identity in politics. For example, Shanto Iyengar argues that political opponents dislike each other as a consequence of group identity, while Michael Hannon and Jeroen de Ridder claim that the psychological basis for political behavior is often group identity and not individuals’ political beliefs. This part also explores the extent to which political disagreements are rational or justified. For instance, Emily McWilliams examines how political beliefs are the result of self-serving biases that make people unwilling to change their beliefs, but she claims that these cognitive biases do not undermine the justification of these beliefs according to an evidentialist theory of epistemic justification.

Several authors in this part (and elsewhere in this handbook) attempt to illustrate how key ideas from epistemology can shed light on foundational issues in political philosophy. For example, Daniel Singer and his colleagues use the tools of formal social epistemology to investigate political polarization, while J. Adam Carter draws on key ideas in epistemology and philosophy of language to deepen our understanding of entrenched political disagreement. However, Elizabeth Edenberg recommends caution about applying the conceptual tools of epistemology to particular debates in political philosophy. She says that recent work in the epistemology of disagreement, for instance, is focused on a different level of analysis than work on disagreement by political philosophers. This makes it difficult to apply ideas from one domain to the other. In broad agreement with Edenberg, Richard Rowland and Robert Simpson claim there are important differences in our epistemic attitudes when we compare the political domain to the non-political domain. Nevertheless, these authors all agree that we can learn important lessons (even about how not to do political epistemology) by considering how the methods and concepts of epistemology bear on political philosophy, and vice versa.

**Part 3: Fake news, misinformation, and propaganda**

Concerns about fake news have featured prominently in public discourse over the past few years. Several countries have created task forces to combat it; others have tried to outlaw it or to push for stricter regulations for social media platforms complicit in the rapid spreading of fake news. But it would be a mistake to think fake news is an entirely novel phenomenon. To give just one example, historian Frank Mott’s 1950 overview of the history of American journalism, *American Journalism: A History of Newspapers in the United States through 260 Years*, describes the so-called “yellow journalism” from the early twentieth century in eerily familiar terms. According to Mott, this brand of tabloid journalism relied on:

> the familiar aspects of sensationalism—crime news, scandal and gossip, divorces and sex, and stress upon the reporting of disasters and sports; [...] the lavish use of pictures, many of them without significance, inviting the abuses of picture-stealing and ‘faked’ pictures; [...] and impostures and frauds of various kinds, such as ‘faked’ interviews and stories (p. 539).

So even though our epistemic environment may seem to be more hostile than ever, we shouldn’t fall into the trap of assuming we ever lived in an epistemically pristine paradise.

Some chapters in this part—those by Axel Gelfert and Megan Hyska in particular—therefore put fake news and misinformation in broader perspectives by connecting them to the more familiar philosophical categories of lies, bullshit, and propaganda. When we try
to understand fake news and misinformation better, it’s helpful to differentiate between its production, its consumption, and its distribution. Neil Levy and Robert Ross address the consumption side by summarizing work from cognitive science about why and to what extent people actually believe fake news. Two chapters, one by Hanna Gunn and one by Cailin O’Connor and James Owen Weatherall, offer a window on the distribution and spread of misinformation. The former discusses the phenomena of echo chambers and filter bubbles, while the latter shows how formal models can shed light on how bad actors can exploit features of social-epistemic networks to manipulate public opinion. Finally, Étienne Brown looks at what can be done to fight misinformation.

Part 4: Ignorance and irrationality in politics

One of the most consistent findings in political science over at least the past 60 years is the staggering depth of citizens’ ignorance about politics in modern democracies. Another consistent finding from psychology is the extent to which our belief-forming processes are shaped by cognitive bias and perhaps even irrational. The chapters in this part center around two issues: the extent and causes of citizen ignorance, and whether (and in what ways) belief-formation in politics is epistemically irrational, even if it may reflect instrumental rationality on the part of citizens.

A common belief is that democracies require informed voters if they are to function well. But when the price of informing yourself adequately is too high, it makes sense for voters to let their beliefs be guided by desires for comfort, affiliation, and belonging. Does this conflict with the epistemic demands of democracy? If it is true, as some political scientists and psychologists allege, that political belief-formation is primarily driven by social identities and “tribal” allegiances, does this make us irrational? This part explores these questions, in addition to questions like: Are we too quick to describe our political opponents as irrational? Are there genuine partisan differences in rational thinking? The chapters by Jeffrey Friedman, Keith Stanovich, and Robin McKenna all suggest that the desire to impute irrationality to our political opponents is misguided, driven by our own ignorance or biases. They do not deny that citizens often lack political knowledge, but they cast doubt on common narratives about the irrationality of would-be voters. The chapters in this part also reflect on the implications of widespread ignorance and/or irrationality for democratic theory.

Part 5: Epistemic virtues and vices in politics

Virtue epistemology has grown into an influential research program in epistemology over the past four decades. And more recently, virtue epistemology’s bad cousin, vice epistemology, has leapt onto the scene. Very broadly speaking, virtue and vice epistemology are concerned with what it is to think well or badly. Even though the world of politics and government offers plenty of examples of both excellent and poor thinking, and it hardly needs saying that politics can benefit from well-informed and intellectually virtuous citizens and politicians, it is still somewhat rare for virtue and vice epistemologists to target political belief-formation, reasoning, and discourse directly.

The chapters in this part take steps to remedy this situation. They either employ the potential of virtue- and vice-theoretical notions for making sense of how we think and argue about politics, or they use examples from politics to develop and sharpen virtue and vice epistemology further. The chapters by Heather Battaly, Alessandra Tanesini, and José Medina fall into the former category. Battaly considers whether closed-mindedness,
typically considered a vice, is actually permissible or perhaps even a virtue when engaging with politicized (mis)information. Drawing on results from psychology, Alessandra Tanesini pushes back against the idea that deliberation does not change people’s minds. There is plenty of evidence it can when people have the right (virtuous) motivations and when they deliberate well. Medina employs intellectual virtue and vice theory to analyze the epistemic behavior of groups. Ian James Kidd’s contribution is an example of the latter category—it uses examples from recent politics and an analysis of corrupting processes to develop a robustly collective construal of epistemic vice. Quassim Cassam explores the limits of vice epistemology and is critical of its analytical and explanatory potential. He worries that imputations of vice to others who disagree with us may themselves be manifestations of epistemic vice.

Part 6: Democracy and epistemology

What is the relevance of epistemology to discussions of democracy and political legitimacy? A foundational question in democratic theory is how important it is that political decisions are good decisions. While it might seem uncontroversial that we want political institutions to promote good decisions, it is also important that these decisions be made by good or appropriate procedures. These criteria can conflict. If we suppose, for instance, that the masses are highly ignorant or prejudiced (see Part 4), then a democratic procedure may lead to bad outcomes, at least from an epistemic perspective. In contrast, an utterly elitist or authoritarian procedure could, in principle, produce the best decisions.

If morally bad procedures can produce epistemically good outcomes, and if morally good procedures can produce epistemically bad outcomes, then how much weight should be given to each of these considerations in the best account of political institutions? Is political legitimacy grounded in facts about the procedure of how political decisions are made, or does political legitimacy reside in the epistemic quality of the outcome (as measured by some procedure-independent standard)? This part explores several important themes in the diverse literature on epistemic approaches to—and problems with—democracy: for instance, the epistemic value of deliberation; the benefits of epistocracy (rule by the knowers); the epistemic foundations of political legitimacy; and the epistemic case for non-electoral forms of democracy.

Hélène Landemore provides an epistemic defense of democracy. She argues that democracy is epistemically superior to oligarchy (including rule by the few best) because it makes maximal use of the cognitive diversity of its citizens. But Jason Brennan doubts that democracy is the best way to achieve our epistemic goals. He argues that democracies incentivize voters to remain ignorant and behave irrationally, so we should reject democracy in favor of epistocracy, which apportions political power on the basis of epistemic competence. Taking a middle path, Alexander Guerrero argues in favor of non-electoral forms of democracy.

The chapters by Fabienne Peter and Robert Talisse take up the question of what makes political decision-making legitimate. They both argue, in different ways, that political decisions are legitimate only if they result from well-ordered political deliberation. But what makes for well-ordered deliberation, and what can we reasonably expect from citizens? In the final chapter of this part, Cameron Boult investigates the epistemic responsibilities of citizens in a democracy.
**General introduction**

**Part 7: Trust, expertise, and doubt**

Issues of trust and expertise already came up implicitly in previous parts. Where can we find trustworthy information when our information environment is polluted by misinformation? Whom should we trust in a polarized society, when even experts often disagree? What to do when there is, moreover, meta-disagreement about who the experts are and how they ought to be identified? Isn’t there an inherent tension between honoring democratic ideals of equality, freedom of speech, and “one person one vote,” on the one hand, and deferring to experts or giving extra weight to their opinions on the other? The chapters in this final part bring these questions to the fore and provide a variety of perspectives for thinking about them, as well as suggested answers and solutions.

Two chapters, one by Heather Douglas and the other by Maria Baghramian and Michel Croce, take on the notion of expertise directly and offer a historical perspective on the role of experts in a democratic society (Douglas) and conceptual analyses of expertise and trust (Baghramian and Croce). Hallvard Lillehammer addresses the concern that deference to expert judgments undermines individual autonomy and democratic equality and suggests that it doesn’t. Mark Alfano and Emily Sullivan bring an institutional perspective on trust to the table. A key problem nowadays is deciding what and whom to trust online. They argue that we need drastic structural reforms—breaking up tech monopolies—to make online platforms more trustworthy. Alex Worsnip’s chapter is another fine example of how theorizing about old philosophical problems, such as the challenge of radical skepticism, can shed new light on a contemporary political and social problem: climate change skepticism.