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Jason Brennan
Georgetown University (United States of America)
jason.brennan@georgetown.edu

ABSTRACT

In this discussion note, I analyze several aspects of Mariano Garreta Leclercq's "Risk-Centered Ordinal Consequentialism". I highlight its valuable contribution in identifying risk as a distinct, third dimension of political disagreement that persists even when disagreements about facts and values are resolved. However, I present five key critiques regarding the practical application of democratic risk aggregation. First, widespread voter ignorance and tribal behavior suggest that expressed policy preferences often reflect factual misunderstandings rather than genuine risk attitudes. Second, the analogy comparing democracies to firms may be flawed because voters frequently reject expert consensus due to predictable biases rather than reasonable variations in risk tolerance. Third, the paper relies on an idealized view of political institutions, underestimating the influence of concentrated interest groups and rationally ignorant voters. Fourth, the complexity of public policy creates a knowledge problem that might be better addressed by expanding exit options, such as "foot voting" and decentralization. Finally, I argue that if there is no objectively correct risk attitude, majoritarian decision-making is just as dominating as expert rule. This suggests that reducing the scope of collective decision-making is a more appropriate conclusion than defending mass democratic aggregation.

Keywords: Risk attitudes, Political ignorance, Epistemic democracy, Domination, Foot voting.

RESUMEN

En esta nota de discusión, analizo varios aspectos de "Risk-Centered Ordinal Consequentialism" de Mariano Garreta Leclercq. Destaco su valiosa contribución al identificar el riesgo como una tercera dimensión distintiva del desacuerdo político que persiste incluso cuando se resuelven los desacuerdos sobre hechos y valores. Sin embargo, presento cinco críticas clave con respecto a la aplicación práctica de la agregación democrática de riesgos. Primero, la ignorancia generalizada y el comportamiento tribal de los votantes sugieren que las preferencias políticas expresadas a menudo reflejan malentendidos fácticos en lugar de actitudes genuinas hacia el riesgo. Segundo, la analogía que compara las democracias con las empresas puede ser defectuosa porque los votantes frecuentemente rechazan el consenso de los expertos debido a sesgos predecibles en lugar de variaciones razonables en la tolerancia al riesgo. Tercero, el artículo se basa en una visión idealizada de las instituciones políticas, subestimando la influencia de los grupos de interés concentrados y los votantes racionalmente ignorantes. Cuarto, la complejidad de las políticas públicas crea un problema de conocimiento que podría abordarse mejor ampliando las opciones de salida, como el "voto con los pies" (*foot voting*) y la descentralización. Finalmente, sostengo que, si no existe una actitud frente al riesgo objetivamente correcta, la toma de decisiones mayoritaria es tan dominadora como el gobierno de los expertos. Esto sugiere que reducir el alcance de la toma de decisiones colectiva es una conclusión más apropiada que defender la agregación democrática de masas.

Palabras clave: Actitudes frente al riesgo, Ignorancia política, Democracia epistémica, Dominación, Voto con los pies.

1. Introduction

Mariano Garreta Leclercq's "Risk-Centered Ordinal Consequentialism" is an impressively ambitious paper. The core insight about risk as a third dimension of political disagreement is genuinely valuable and underdiscussed in theorizing about epistemic democracy. Much democratic theory focuses almost entirely on disagreement about facts or values, and the paper usefully highlights that disagreement about acceptable levels of risk can persist even when those other disagreements are resolved. This is an important contribution and fertile ground for further research projects at both the level of theory and on empirical questions of voter preference and behavior.

In this discussion note, I will offer five sets of comments. My goal is not to refute the paper or its argument, but to press on some of its pressure points and to see what we might learn from further intellectual exchange.

2. Political Ignorance and Tribalism

First, I keep getting stuck on what seems like a significant practical difficulty for the argument. The framework depends on the idea that democratic procedures aggregate the risk attitudes of affected individuals in a meaningful way. But this presupposes that citizens possess at least a minimal—and non insignificant or vanishingly minimal—level of epistemic competence and normative reasonableness. Garreta Leclercq notes that the argument becomes more complicated if or when this assumption does not hold.

The difficulty is that there is a large empirical literature suggesting that many voters lack even very basic political knowledge. Large percentages of citizens cannot name their representatives, do not know which party controls which branch of government, and hold systematically mistaken beliefs about basic economic relationships. The exact numbers and measurements vary from country to country, place to place, and time to time, but the pattern is consistent and well known.

If this is right, then many expressed policy preferences may not reflect genuine attitudes toward risk so much as misunderstandings about the underlying facts. Our expressed attitudes towards risk are rarely pure, precise trade-offs made while holding all the other facts and values constant; they are instead usually embedded in and caused by our possibly mistaken factual beliefs. If, for instance, I ask a person with mistaken medical views about the risk of vaccination, it will be difficult to untangle how much of their expressed views concerns rational attitudes towards risk and how much are dependent on their mistaken beliefs about how vaccines work.

This in turn raises a question about the scope of the argument. Is the claim that contestatory democracy is superior under reasonably favorable epistemic conditions, or that it performs better even under the informational conditions that actually prevail in modern democracies? If the latter, it would be helpful to see more discussion of how the framework handles widespread voter ignorance.

I also wonder whether the firm analogy fails to acknowledge an important difference between economic and political decision-making. In firms, partners typically have strong incentives to become informed because their decisions directly and significantly affect their own outcomes. They pay the price for being wrong and bear the benefits of being right. The world to some extent disciplines them toward the truth.

In large-scale democracies, by contrast, any individual vote is extremely unlikely to determine policy outcomes. As a result, citizens often vote expressively or tribally rather than instrumentally. Indeed a great deal of research in psychology and political science claims that many voters join political movements largely as ways to express who they are and to form social alliances with others. Politics, for them, is not about policy. Many (indeed, I think the majority) of voters simply copy the prevailing opinions of their party; they do not vote for that party because they agree with it, but agree with the party because they vote for it.

If so, democratic voting may not reliably reveal underlying risk attitudes in the way the analogy suggests. It would be surprising if risk attitudes were immune from this dynamic or escaped this trend.

3. The Miner-Firm Analogy

Let's look more closely at the contrast between the Miners case and the firm case, which seems central to the argument.

The paper argues that the Miners case involves a uniquely rational risk attitude, whereas the firm case allows for a range of reasonable attitudes toward risk. In the latter case, democratic procedures are justified because experts cannot legitimately impose their own risk preferences on others.

This raises an essential question: how many real policy domains actually resemble the firm case rather than the Miners case? How do we know?

In many areas of public policy there appears to be substantial expert consensus about the likely effects of different policies. Trade policy is one clear example. Economists across the spectrum broadly and strongly agree that free trade produces net gains, even though it has distributional consequences. Housing policy provides another example. Economists agree that increasing housing supply tends to reduce prices. Monetary policy is often cited as a further case, as large amounts of research finds that central bank independence generally produces better macroeconomic outcomes than politically controlled money.

In these areas and many, many others, democratic majorities frequently reject expert consensus. When they do so, we must ask whether and to what extent this reflects reasonable differences in risk attitudes rather than systematic errors in beliefs about how policies work. Extensive research in political economy suggests that voters exhibit predictable biases—for instance, systematic skepticism about markets, pessimism about economic conditions, pessimism about crime, and hostility toward foreigners. If those patterns are driven primarily by misinformation rather than reasonable variation in risk attitudes, then the analogy with the firm case may be weaker than it initially appears.

None of this by itself shows that epistocracy is desirable as a general institutional arrangement. But it remains open that at least in some domains expert judgment may outperform democratic aggregation and that focusing on risk is the wrong issue.

4. Real World Politics and the Scope of Politics

Garreta Leclercq is right to be skeptical about the idea that politics can simply be reduced to discovering the "correct" answer. Political decision-making often involves coordinating among people who have genuinely different projects, values, and tolerances for risk. In that sense, the emphasis on disagreement about acceptable risk seems well motivated. How to evaluate risk is partly a value judgment—and while I am not a radical value subjectivist, reasonable people may disagree about trade-offs regarding risk.

However, I worry that the paper relies on a somewhat or perhaps a significantly idealized institutional framework. The framework seems to assume that contestatory democracy will approximate the two poles identified in the paper: broad consensus among affected parties and deregulation without domination. Political competition is supposed to reveal preferences, contestatory mechanisms are supposed to protect minorities, and the process is supposed to remain open and revisable. This is at least the kind of idealized picture that neorepublicans and epistemic democrats rely on, a picture that, as I noted above, often involves optimistic assumptions about whether voters are voting for their policy preferences versus voting for social reasons.

In practice, political institutions do not follow this ideal picture. Concentrated interest groups have strong incentives to invest in and capture political influence. Voters are rationally ignorant, expressive, and tribal. Politicians respond to organized groups rather than diffuse majorities. As a result, political outcomes often diverge significantly from anything resembling the aggregation of citizen preferences. And, of course, it's often unclear whether citizens' preferences can meaningfully be aggregated.

For that reason, I wonder whether the "deregulation without domination" pole should receive more emphasis in the framework. One possible implication of the argument about risk attitudes is that many political disagreements arise precisely because decisions are made collectively. When individuals are able to choose among different arrangements—through markets, federalism, or other decentralized mechanisms—many of these conflicts disappear.

If risk attitudes are deeply heterogeneous and no single attitude is objectively correct, then reducing the scope of collective decision-making might sometimes be the most effective way to accommodate that diversity. Instead of asking what's the best way for us to decide together, we should ask whether we really must decide together, period.

5. The Knowledge Problem and Foot Voting

The knowledge problem may also be somewhat deeper than the paper acknowledges.

In many policy areas—such as monetary policy, financial regulation, foreign policy, or pharmaceutical approval—understanding the consequences of different policies requires a fairly sophisticated conceptual framework plus knowledge of a huge range of particular facts. These domains involve complex causal relationships, feedback effects, and technical considerations that take years to master.

If citizens do not understand what policies actually do, their expressed preferences about those policies are unlikely to meaningfully reflect their attitudes toward risk. Instead, they are more likely to reflect reactions to political rhetoric, partisan cues, or symbolic considerations.

The firm analogy again raises an interesting issue here. In firms, partners usually have the option of exit. If they disagree strongly with the firm's strategy or risk tolerance, they can sell their shares or join a different venture. This exit option plays an important role in aligning incentives and encouraging information acquisition. Voters barely incur a cost when they make a good choice or a benefit when they make a bad one, but people who exit firms directly bear the costs and benefits of their decisions.

In contrast, citizens often face extremely high exit costs. Moving to a different jurisdiction can be difficult or impossible. When exit is limited and individual votes rarely affect outcomes, the incentives to become informed are correspondingly weak.

Institutional arrangements that expand opportunities for "foot voting"—such as decentralization, federalization, the competitive provision of services, or international unions with free movement—are likely to be more effective ways of allowing individuals to express their risk preferences through meaningful choices.

6. If There's No Correct Answer about Risk, Then There's No Correct Answer about Risk

Finally, I want to raise what seems to me the most fundamental question about the paper's argument.

Garreta Leclercq's central claim is that experts cannot legitimately impose their preferred risk attitudes on others, because reasonable individuals may disagree about acceptable levels of risk. In contexts of risk, there is no uniquely correct answer that experts can claim to implement on behalf of everyone. That is a plausible claim in many cases, I agree.

But this is a sword that cuts both ways. If that is correct, then that same reasoning applies to majoritarian or other forms of mass collective decision-making. It is unclear how majoritarian decision-making avoids the same difficulty or why Garreta Leclercq's argument is not also a critique of rather than a defense of democracy. If experts imposing their risk preferences on the majority constitutes domination, why is it not equally problematic for a majority to impose its risk preferences on a minority? If I am being stomped on by a master, it doesn't much matter to me whether the master has one thousand or one million heads. I think we are long past the point in democratic theory of treating democratic decisions as inherently not dominating of the individuals subject to them. On this point, as an aside, one of my persistent worries with neorepublicans is that despite talking at length about domination, they don't take the issue of domination seriously enough.

The paper points toward mechanisms such as contestation, minority protections, and partial deregulation to mitigate this concern. This doesn't do as much work as Garreta Leclercq thinks. For one, these mechanisms can also apply to elite decision-making. Two, despite these protections, the underlying structure remains one in which collective decisions impose some group's risk attitudes on others. Indeed, it might be worse than that—sometimes when we aggregate decisions, the "group's risk attitude" might not be shared even by most people in the winning group.

In that sense, the argument seems to have more radical implications than Garreta Leclercq acknowledges. If risk preferences are irreducibly individual and there is no privileged standpoint from which to declare one risk attitude superior, then coercive collective decision-making may always involve a form of domination. That pushes the argument toward greater emphasis on deregulation and decentralization rather than toward the defense of democratic aggregation.

None of this undermines the paper's central insight about the role of risk in political disagreement. But it does raise interesting questions about where that insight ultimately leads.

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