Ordinary citizens are rarely charged with making consequential political decisions in representative democracies. In contrast with ancient Athens and other past forms of popular government, almost all consequential decisions are delegated to elected representatives, political appointees or career bureaucrats. On what basis should we judge whether consequential decisions should be placed in the hands of ordinary citizens or delegated to political elites? I argue that decision-making authority should be allocated in whatever way an assembly of randomly selected citizens would choose, deciding by majority rule and given adequate information about the possible choices. I develop this standard through a discussion of social choice theory and a critique of rival approaches in the recent literature on “epistemic democracy.”

The standard I defend is a variation of the principal-agent model of political agency, in which the people are viewed as a principal and officeholders as their agents. As it is usually formulated, the objectives of the people are defined in terms of the preferences of the majority, or the median citizen. I draw on this familiar formulation in “Citizens’ Assemblies as Instruments of Popular Rule” to explain why the median citizen might rationally prefer to delegate authority to a citizens’ assembly instead of an elected legislature, as well as why she might rationally view citizens’ assemblies with distrust, when they are organized and administered by elites.

But the standard formulation of the principal-agent model does not provide a coherent standard for judging the delegation of decision-making authority when there is no median citizen and the will of the majority is not well-defined. In several chapters on social choice theory, I explain this problem and why political theorists’ previous responses to challenges from social choice theory have been unconvincing. In light of this problem, I argue for a revisionary understanding of the principal-agent model, according to which the people and its will are identified, not with the preferences of the majority but rather with the decisions of a citizens’ assembly.

To motivate this way of thinking about the delegation of decision-making authority I offer a critique of the recent literature on “epistemic democ-
racy,” which describes an alternative form of justification for empowering ordinary citizens. Appeals to expertise and knowledge have historically figured prominently in justifications of political exclusion and hierarchy, but epistemic democrats put them to use in defending more participatory, inclusive forms of politics. Epistemic arguments for democracy claim that decision processes in which inexpert, ordinary citizens participate can exhibit greater “collective wisdom” than elite- or expert-dominated decision-making. In “Disagreement and Epistemic Arguments for Democracy,” I explain why these arguments sit uncomfortably with the fact that political disagreements arise from conflicts of values and principles and not simply disputes over technical, factual questions. This disagreement imposes constraints on how we justify political institutions, and I show how epistemic arguments violate these constraints.