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Political Meritocracy and Democracy

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Abstract

Political meritocracy is the idea that political institutions should aim to em-
power those people who are particularly well-suited to rule. This article
surveys recent literature in democratic theory that argues on behalf of insti-
tutional arrangements that aim to realize the ideal of political meritocracy.
We detail two prominent families of meritocratic proposals: nondemocratic
meritocracy and weighted voting. We then describe and briefly evaluate five
potentially important criticisms of political meritocracy related to the coher-
ence of merit as an ideal, the demographic objection, rent-seeking, political
inequality, and social peace. We also consider the key ways in which existing
electoral democracies create spaces for institutionally meritocratic forms. Fi-
nally, we highlight the importance of exploring institutional innovations that
allow democracies to effectively incorporate expertise without, at the same
time, becoming vulnerable to the criticisms of political meritocracy that we
discuss.

INTRODUCTION

In the broadest sense, one can understand political meritocracy as the idea that political institutions should aim to empower those people who are particularly well-suited to rule. As Daniel Bell (2013, p. 3), a leading proponent of the position, explains,

> The basic idea of political meritocracy is that everybody should have an equal opportunity to be educated and to contribute to politics, but not everybody will emerge from this process with an equal capacity to make morally informed judgments. Hence, the task of politics is to identify those with above average ability and to make them serve the political community.

A relatively wide range of capacities could qualify as relevant here, including political knowledge and expertise, as well as a willingness to subjugate one's own interests to those of the broader community.

While interest in political meritocracy, and connected skepticism about democracy, dates back to the earliest works of political philosophy (e.g., Plato's *Republic*), the recently burgeoning literature on political meritocracy seems to have emerged, in part, out of some recent, and highly visible, failures of democratic states. These failures include repeated and self-imposed financial crises, the rise of populist parties that arguably seek to exploit hate-based political messaging, and the inability to address crucial long-term problems (such as climate change and refugee crises).

Advocates of political meritocracy tend to connect these broad failures to certain micro-level features of democratic systems with universal equal suffrage. Perhaps most notably, because individual voters have little, if any, chance to swing an election, they have correspondingly little reason to invest in the kind of competence that would be needed to make effective political decisions. The result, according to familiar depictions of democracy, is that elections select telegenic celebrities who are ill-suited for political leadership and those elected leaders then proceed to pander to the uninformed preferences of their constituents, while rationally, but dangerously, prioritizing short-term consequences over longer-term considerations.

This portrayal of democracy raises a number of important worries. Such a system seems poorly positioned to protect the important interests of minority groups, it appears particularly vulnerable to capture by wealthy individuals who can exercise disproportionate influence over public opinion, it seems designed to exacerbate conflict among citizens, and there seems to be no mechanism to protect those who do not vote (such as foreigners and future generations). Altogether, this account of democracy offers an explanation for why such regimes seem to stumble from one crisis to another with seemingly little capacity to effectively address pressing challenges. One can challenge this portrayal of democracy in a myriad of ways (some of which are discussed below), but the literature on political meritocracy presents an increasingly important alternative and a series of arguments worth understanding and engaging with, even if and when they fall short.

We proceed as follows. The first two sections describe the most prominent families of proposed institutionalizations of political meritocracy: nondemocratic meritocracy and weighted voting. The third section rehearses and evaluates important criticisms of such proposals. We then explain how egalitarian forms of democracy can, if properly designed, instantiate a level of political meritocracy, which calls into question the portrayal of democracy on which recent arguments for political meritocracy depend. Finally, we discuss the charge that existing representative democracies have given too much weight to meritocratic mechanisms, rendering them vulnerable to the very criticisms that many scholars of democracy have raised about nondemocratic meritocracy and weighted voting.

Before proceeding, we note an important constraint on the scope of our discussion. Interest in political meritocracy is analytically and chronologically intertwined with a renewed debate

about the appeal of meritocracy as a broader social ideal (see, e.g., Markovits 2019, Sandel 2020, Wooldridge 2021). Some of the themes in that debate naturally bear on the discussion of political meritocracy, including what constitutes merit, how feasible it is to select on merit, the equality of opportunity to acquire and display markers of merit, and whether it is desirable to have merit-based social organization. We discuss these themes in the narrower context of political meritocracy below, without attempting to review the broader debate about the appeal of meritocracy.

NONDEMOCRATIC MERITOCRACY

Perhaps the most dramatic form of political meritocracy that has garnered interest in the literature is nondemocratic meritocracy. The core idea is to create a bureaucratic hierarchy with primary, if not sole, responsibility for policymaking. The critical aspects are as follows:

- Applicants may join the bureaucracy, at the lowest ranks, by performing well on a standardized exam.
- Members of the bureaucracy are then promoted through the ranks based on analysis of their performance conducted by those in higher positions (e.g., members' success in promoting economic development).
- Those at the top of the hierarchy are expected to retire when they reach a certain age or term limit. (While this last condition may not be a necessary feature of nondemocratic meritocracy, having it in place makes such regimes more palatable by ensuring rotation in leadership.)

While nondemocratic meritocracy is meant to be an institutional ideal, interest in it has surely been driven, in part, by the resemblance that some of its components have to governing institutions in China and Singapore (Bell 2013, Wong 2013, Xiao & Li 2013).[1] Even though the Chinese exam system was justified via reference to the Confucian idea of a hierarchy of talents (Ho 1962), there is considerable empirical debate about whether the Chinese system is, indeed, meritocratic (or, perhaps, debate about at what levels and during what time periods the Chinese system was and is meritocratic) (see, e.g., Li & Zhou 2005, Shih et al. 2012, Bai & Jia 2016). However, the proper characterization of the Chinese system is largely orthogonal to the theoretical debate about political meritocracy.

Just as there is a variety of different forms of democracy (presidential versus parliamentary, proportional representation–based versus majoritarian, etc.), so too one can imagine a variety of different forms of nondemocratic meritocracy. The most prominent proposals incorporate elements of democracy, often seeking to retain it at the local level, where the barriers to effective participation may seem smaller (e.g., Bai 2013; Bell 2016, chapter 4). While Bell would—at least in China—not utilize elections at the national level, other proposals involve bicameral systems that seek to balance a democratically elected chamber with one selected either by prominent public officials (who may be thought to have better information about people's capacity than would voters) (Chan 2013) or by examination (Bai 2013).

The ostensible appeal of meritocratic institutions connects relatively straightforwardly to the critical picture of democracy that motivates such proposals. We emphasize the following central points:

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[1]Interest in such arrangements is often argued for from a distinctively Confucian perspective (e.g., Chan 2007, Fan 2013). Because such arguments have been separately and recently reviewed in this venue (Jiang 2018), we set them aside in this article. Pei (2017) provides a historical account of the ideas of political meritocracy in China from the Han Dynasty on.

- Whereas electoral systems are charged with allowing ignorant citizens to select telegenic, but unskilled, candidates, bureaucratic systems can allow entry to those who demonstrate a baseline level of capacity (Bai 2013, p. 56; Bell 2016, p. 89) and then promote those who perform well at lower ranks. A key hallmark of a nondemocratic political meritocracy is that it aims to entrust policymaking to a highly capable and competent subset of citizens.
- Whereas electoral systems make it very difficult for officials to focus on the long-term consequences of their policy decisions, policymaking in a nondemocratic meritocracy is not distorted by an election cycle (Bai 2013, p. 56; Bell 2016, p. 53).
- Whereas an electoral system risks exacerbating polarization by incentivizing candidates to draw strong contrasts with, and magnify the weaknesses of, the opposition, a bureaucratic system allows policymaking to proceed without developing or magnifying such cleavages (Bell 2016, pp. 54–61; Bitton 2024). Put slightly differently, an electoral system incentivizes leaders to focus on areas of small differences between competing elites, whereas a bureaucratic system encourages elites to focus attention on areas of agreement that seem ripe for broad-based social welfare gains.

Before turning to criticisms of such proposals, we describe in the following section a different way to institutionalize political meritocracy.

WEIGHTED VOTING

In chapter eight of *Considerations on Representative Government*, John Stuart Mill (1998) famously argues for two important types of deviation from one person–one vote. First, citizens with higher levels of education should, in his account, be given more voting power: more votes (or greater weights) in the voting scheme, which he describes as plural voting. Second, certain categories of citizens—e.g., the illiterate and the innumerate—should not be permitted to vote at all. Because restrictions on franchise and plural voting can both be thought of as forms of weighted voting (where restrictions on franchise are the extreme case), we use the latter term as an encompassing category.

In recent years, a number of scholars have followed Mill's lead in arguing for systems of weighted voting, which, rather than replacing elections with bureaucratic selection, aim to improve the performance of electoral systems by organizing them so that the educated or otherwise better informed have more voting power than others. Brennan (2011) holds that "citizens should have to possess sufficient moral and epistemic competence in order to have the right to vote" (p. 701). His argument for this position is by analogy with a criminal jury: Just as we have a right not to have our plight determined by an irrational or otherwise incompetent jury at trial, so too should we be regarded as having a right not to be ruled in political life by incompetent voters. A different kind of argument for weighted voting is epistemic: We are just more likely to get the right outcome if we give more voting power to more competent voters (Mulligan 2018, Jones 2021).

Other kinds of arguments work by showing that it is difficult to reject weighted voting if one is also committed to certain common views. Many think that it is wrong, in the distributive context, to insist on equality if the only way to get there is to make some worse off without benefiting others. If such "leveling down" is wrong, then it may be difficult to argue for one person–one vote, which may appear to be a case of making people worse off for the purpose of facilitating equality (Peña-Rangel 2022). Similarly, if one is willing to paternalistically interfere with X's consumption choices because we are convinced that others know better than X what is good for her, then it is difficult to see why one should not be permitted to interfere with X's voting choices if others know better than X what will be good for the broader political community (Brennan & Freiman 2022). Finally, it may be difficult to argue for voting age restrictions in a way that simultaneously rules out weighted voting because age is relevant as a proxy for competence (Hinze 2023).

While weighted voting and nondemocratic meritocracy are both forms of political meritocracy, the ostensible benefits that their advocates focus on are not identical. As we have seen, for nondemocratic meritocracy, those include delegating political decision-making to a more competent set of people than does egalitarian democracy, as well as avoiding negative externalities of electoral selection such as emphasizing short-run consequences and generating a high degree of social conflict. By contrast, advocates of weighted voting focus primarily on the epistemically superior policymaking that would putatively result from empowering a more sophisticated set of voters. It is difficult to see how that practice, in and of itself, would alleviate social conflict, though one could imagine mechanisms that link it to greater attention to long-run consequences of policies. Still, the departure from egalitarian democracy that advocates of weighted voting suggest, though dramatic against the background of the social and political norms, is more measured than would be nondemocratic meritocracy. From that perspective, it would be fair to describe the promised added benefits of weighted voting as somewhat more modest.

CRITICISMS OF POLITICAL MERITOCRACY

Having described two prominent ways to institutionalize political meritocracy (nondemocratic meritocracy and weighted voting), we now pivot to surveying five important types of criticisms that have been made of such proposals.

Skepticism About Merit

It may be tempting to think that the idea of political meritocracy is a nonstarter because of familiar arguments in political philosophy that question the very idea of merit. Most famously, John Rawls argues that insofar as people's talent and willingness to work derive from some combination of natural talents and upbringing, it makes little sense to think of people as deserving their productive capacity in any strong sense. While arguments of this kind may challenge the notion that people deserve positions of political power because of their underlying merit, they do not pose a threat to standard arguments for political meritocracy, since those arguments depend—as we have seen—on the claim that the society as a whole will benefit as a result of assigning political power to those who are most fit to exercise it competently. From this vantage point, the source, or deservingness, of merit seems beside the point; indeed, skeptics about merit make a similar point with respect to distributive justice, observing that it can be justified to allow those with unearned capacity to benefit from it so long as doing so incentivizes them to produce in ways that benefit all (Rawls 1999; see also Daniels 1978).

A different form of skepticism about merit holds that because we cannot agree on what constitutes merit, it is a nonstarter to organize a regime around it (see, e.g., Christiano 2008, pp. 118–19). One way that political meritocrats have responded (e.g., Chan 2013, p. 49) is by pointing out that disagreement is unavoidable—there is also disagreement, for instance, on whether majority rule treats citizens fairly (members of permanent minorities may not think so). It is, thus, not obvious that disagreement poses a problem specifically for political meritocracy; it is difficult to imagine an allocation of political power that would not meet with significant disagreement. Another, if somewhat more implicit, response has been to maintain that there are relatively noncontroversial signs of merit, including possession of relevant political information and revealed superlative traits and accomplishments, such as academic successes or a track record of strong performance in office (see, e.g., Li 2012, p. 305; Wong 2013).[2]

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[2] Sachs-Cobbe & Douglas (2024) provide a survey of economic and political meritocracy that focuses primarily on delineating the distinct bases of the claims of desert.

Demographic Objection

A second concern concedes, at least for the sake of argument, that we could agree on markers of merit. This criticism hinges, instead, on challenging the notion that the meritocratically selected individuals' exercise of political power will, in fact, be broadly beneficial. Estlund provides perhaps the most well-known formulation of this objection (known as the demographic objection). He explains that, even if we could fill political offices with a group of citizens with markers of competence and trust them to select the policies that they think would best promote the public good, it would still be reasonable to worry that they may be "no better able to rule wisely than others" because they "may disproportionately have epistemically damaging features that countervail" their epistemic advantages (Estlund 2009, p. 215; see also Christiano 2008, pp. 120–21).

Two main types of considerations could underlie the demographic objection (Ingham & Wiens 2021). First, some groups (e.g., the wealthy) may have greater opportunities than others to develop markers of competence (e.g., education), but it could be that they also share some other feature (e.g., a lack of empathy) that undermines their overall competence. Second, even if everyone had equal chances to develop markers of competence, it could be that one's motivation to do so is correlated with some other characteristic (e.g., risk acceptance) that simultaneously undermines competence. In an interesting paper that develops an argument along these lines, Hannon (2022) claims that those who have more political knowledge (and so are more likely to pass the kind of exams that some political meritocrats favor) are also less objective because their judgment is undermined by their tendency to see issues through a partisan lens (for a response sympathetic to political meritocracy, see Gibbons 2022).

In effect, the demographic objection threatens the inference that political meritocrats make from observed competence markers (e.g., with respect to education, political knowledge, performance in lower offices) to overall competence. Moreover, because characteristics that may undermine competence among those who perform well with respect to tests or other measures may be difficult, or even impossible, to identify, the demographic objection raises serious concerns about whether arguments for political meritocracy can be made in a publicly defensible manner. Indeed, this point is often missed in the literature. For instance, Brennan (2018) has proposed an institution that would give greater weight to the most informed members of particular demographic groups (similarly, see Ahlstrom-Vij 2022). So, for instance, those Catholics who score highest on competence tests will have their voting power magnified, whereas Catholics who score poorly on competence tests will have their voting power diminished. While offered partly as a way of sidestepping the demographic objection, the proposal is still vulnerable to it because there may well be facts that cannot be readily observed about well-educated Catholics that explain why they have greater political knowledge than their counterparts, but these facts could simultaneously undermine the former's political competence (Ingham & Wiens 2021).

The demographic objection is interesting because it proposes to defeat arguments for political meritocracy on precisely the dimension, epistemic performance, on which the appeal of those proposals largely depends (unlike the three objections to political meritocracy that we discuss next, which stem, instead, from considerations related to other values altogether). This explains why the demographic objection has seemed particularly tantalizing as a response to political meritocrats.

But is this objection decisive vis-à-vis political meritocracy? Probably not, for two reasons. First, note that the same objection could be made in other areas in which we are perfectly comfortable with competence tests, such as tests to fly commercial airliners. While it is, in principle, possible that the people who pass such tests have other characteristics that undermine their overall competence, few—presumably—are willing to see that as a good argument against competence

tests for commercial pilots. So why is the situation different when it comes to political meritoc-racy? After all, the intuition of the meritocrats, dating back to Plato, is precisely that political decision-making is a skilled craft, roughly parallel to flying a plane (or, for Plato, navigating a boat).

Second, a number of distinct kinds of institutions—some real, others imagined—entrust political power to an especially able set of individuals, without being vulnerable to the demographic objection or at least mitigating that vulnerability to a considerable degree. One example is what López-Guerra (2011) refers to as the "enfranchisement lottery," which selects a random set of citizens to be voters (thus disenfranchising the majority of unselected citizens). The selected citizens are then given special training and education before voting. Because the voters are randomly selected, there is little reason to think that they would, *ex ante*, share demographic features that would differentiate them from the broader class of citizens and undermine their competence. At the same time, were the institution to work, it would give political power to a class of particularly meritocratic citizens.[3]

Going beyond the somewhat special example of the enfranchisement lottery, note that the demographic objection is strongest when there is no possibility of incentivizing the officeholders to overcome their biases and/or of revisiting their selection in light of the evidence of their performance. Yet, while there is little discussion in the literature on the demographic objection of institutional provisions that implement these elements and how they might affect the force of the objection, these elements are, arguably, central to many systems that aim to be meritocratic, including nondemocratic meritocracies. An exception to this general tendency of the literature is a recent paper by Bitton (2024), which argues that nondemocratic meritocracies should incorporate mini-publics precisely to help identify and overcome biases that may otherwise exist in the decision-making of selected officials. The full extent to which merit-based regimes can successfully implement provisions that mitigate bias remains an open question.

Rent-Seeking

The framework of the demographic objection assumes that those selected will wield political power in a good-faith manner, choosing the policies that they believe are best from the perspective of the public good. Of course, even if we successfully choose the most knowledgeable or competent officeholders, these individuals may deliberately use their positions of power for private benefit. Indeed, in the absence of sufficient safeguards, it would presumably be difficult for most of us to resist doing so, at least to some degree. What prevents the educated from using their weighted votes to enact policies that disproportionately benefit them? What prevents those at the top of a meritocratic hierarchy from organizing the bureaucracy so that it is responsive to their own private interests? This version of the concern about rent-seeking in political meritocracy is a variation on the familiar "who will guard the guardians?" problem (for examples of this line of criticism of nondemocratic meritocracy, see Bagg 2018; He & Warren 2020; Bendor & Swistak 2025).

Much of the literature on political meritocracy, especially the literature in connection with weighted voting, simply ignores this problem. When this problem is considered, the standard approach is to conceive of the relevant selection devices broadly enough to encompass virtue or public-spiritedness—in effect, the relevant competence should include not just knowledge or

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[3]Democratic institutions, too, may face a problem that is broadly similar to the demographic objection—in particular, because the body of voters in democratic elections is not perfectly representative of the broader class of citizens, the choices they make may be epistemically deficient (see, e.g., Brennan & Landemore 2022, chapter 4). But see Kogelmann (2023) for a contrasting view.

policy sophistication, but also a willingness to use that knowledge for the public's good (e.g., Li 2012, pp. 309–11; Wong 2013). This approach, however, runs into two challenges: First, it is not clear that one can design institutions to effectively select on virtue in an environment in which people have every incentive to act as though they were virtuous; second, it is also unclear whether those selected would resist the substantial temptation that comes with the opportunities available to policymakers even if the selected individuals are, all else equal, more virtuous than others.

Bell (2016, pp. 112–21) points to additional resources for mitigating corruption (while also emphasizing that electoral regimes often have their own corruption problems), including a free press, an independent anticorruption agency, high salaries for public officials, and the rule of law. A further resource that meritocrats might reasonably reach for in response to concerns about rent-seeking is the constraint implied by broad public pressure. Even in a nondemocratic meritocracy, the leaders of the regime must worry that if they become sufficiently unpopular, the broad public—perhaps assisted by ambitious members of the elite—may seek to overthrow the regime. Indeed, Bai & Jia (2016) argue that the elimination of the examination system in China in 1905 directly contributed to the popular rebellion that undermined the Qing dynasty. In a related discussion, Liu (2023) argues that the perception of fairer access to political power in contemporary China has dampened calls for fundamental change in the form of economic redistribution. Depending on the power of the public (which may hinge on a variety of factors, including the technological environment), the threat of rebellion may serve as a significant constraint on the ability and willingness of meritocrats to engage in rent-seeking behavior. That there are limits on how leaders may use their power even in nondemocratic regimes is part of the standard framework for studying nondemocratic regimes in the political economy literature (e.g., Acemoglu & Robinson 2006, p. 121; Magaloni & Kricheli 2010), but the presence of these limits has received little attention in the democratic theory literature. While such considerations are not likely to entirely alleviate worries about rent-seeking in the context of political meritocracy, they imply important limits on rent-seeking in nondemocratic regimes of certain types, even if selection devices cannot reliably identify incorruptible individuals to hold office.

Undermining Political Equality

Probably the most commonly made objection to political meritocracy hinges on egalitarian considerations. For an early and astute example, see Beitz (1989, pp. 32–40), who—focusing on Mill's (1998) plural voting scheme—argues that such an arrangement (*a*) is likely to produce results that would treat the interests of those with less political power inequitably and (*b*) "would undermine the self-esteem of those whom it disadvantages" (Beitz 1989, p. 40). While the former consideration does not seem distinct from those related to the demographic objection and/or rent-seeking, the latter does raise a distinct issue. Can political meritocrats effectively parry this this egalitarian consideration?

It seems that two possibilities present themselves for the advocate of political meritocracy. The first possibility is structurally analogous to Rawls's argument for why the disadvantaged should accept the inequalities associated with the difference principle. They should do so because there is no other scheme under which they would be better off, and, in particular, they would be much worse off without those inequalities. In other words, the difference principle is not an offense to the standing of the least advantaged or to the social basis of their self-respect because the worst off under such a system are better off than the worst off under any alternative system. Thus, the difference principle does best at treating the disadvantaged as equals. Political meritocrats often make the same kind of argument: Namely, we will all be better off if political power is controlled

by those with relevant skills (instead of by those who can, for instance, effectively pander to a crowd) (see, e.g., Bai 2013, p. 81; 2019). In fact, Beitz recognizes this possibility and accepts that, if it were true, political meritocracy would be consistent with political equality, properly understood (similarly, see Viehoff 2019). Beitz disagrees only that it is likely to generate such results. From this perspective, the dispute about political meritocracy and equality is derivative. What we think about it should depend on what we think about the epistemic case for political meritocracy.

The second way that the political meritocrat can push back on the claim that their preferred schemes are at odds with political equality hinges on stressing the variety of available conceptions of political equality. It is an important aspect of Bell's position, for instance, that selection into the bureaucracy is made under conditions of equal opportunity; otherwise, it would be difficult to regard the system as meaningfully meritocratic. Similarly, one can imagine an argument for weighted voting that insists that it would be justified only if people with similar skills and motivation had similar chances of gaining voting power, regardless of their family background or other immaterial considerations. Yet, if political meritocracy were, in this way, consistent with equal opportunity for political influence, it is not obvious that it is inferior from the perspective of political equality relative to egalitarian forms of representative democracy (for an argument to this effect, see Landa & Pevnick 2025, chapter 4). Both have (imperfect) mechanisms to advance equal opportunity for influence, and neither distributes political power equally (even egalitarian forms of representative democracies give some—e.g., representatives—more power than others).

The essential point is that different regime types operate around different conceptions of equal opportunity for political influence. Representative democracy is consistent with one person–one vote, lottery-based systems with an equal chance to hold political office and meritocratic systems with fair competition for political power. Moreover, as H. Landemore (unpublished manuscript) emphasizes, it is far from obvious that electoral representation's conception should be favored— such a system would seem, for instance, to make it arbitrarily difficult for the shy but politically competent citizen to get to exercise political power. Why should that citizen regard electoral representation as more consistent with political equality than selection by exams or promotion according to a performance metric? While one conception may ultimately be shown to be categorically superior to another, the debate is not typically that sophisticated; instead, it is too often simply assumed that political meritocracy can have little to say for itself on egalitarian grounds. This assumption may make it artificially easy to dispatch political meritocracy.

Social Peace

Influential accounts in comparative politics seek to explain how broadly egalitarian electoral systems manage to induce competing elites to hold elections and comply with their outcomes. Two notable mechanisms are that

- elections make the distribution of public support for competing coalitions known, which alerts losers to the danger of trying to hold onto power (Przeworski 1999, p. 49); and
- the cancellation of elections signals to citizens that they should oppose the regime: Because only candidates who expect to lose have reason to cancel elections, doing so implies that they lack public support and thereby invites other attempts at regime change (Fearon 2011, p. 1662).

The proximate target of these accounts is autocracies, not political meritocracies. The mechanisms they focus on help explain how, unlike autocracies, electoral systems with broad and relatively egalitarian suffrage incentivize competing elites to transfer power peacefully and,

thus, avoid political violence and maintain a level of stability that facilitates mutually beneficial economic interaction.

Yet these mechanisms are relevant to assessing political meritocracies, as well, even if there is little extant work on this point. In fact, defenses of political meritocracy often focus on the ostensible epistemic benefits, while simply assuming that—if enacted—the relevant institutions will be able to elicit broad compliance. There are, however, reasons for skepticism. Consider schemes of weighted voting or elections conducted by simulations tied to the preferences of well-informed members of various demographic groups. In both cases, it would be possible for a candidate to win an election while a large majority of citizens vote for the opposing candidate and for this fact to be publicly known. Such a scenario appears to be an invitation for instability. The losing candidate would have a substantial incentive to press their case for office via extrainstitutional means (an uprising, a potential coup), and, unless their supporters were confident that those who were given more voting power were voting in an informed and virtuous manner (which will surely be subject to doubt), they will have reasons to support such steps. From this perspective, weighted voting schemes seem to have a built-in susceptibility to domestic conflict that has not been sufficiently considered in the literature.

Something similar is likely true of systems built around nondemocratic meritocracy (Landa & Pevnick 2025, chapter 6). When a leader comes to be widely disliked in an electoral system, the mechanisms underlying Przeworski's and Fearon's arguments explain how they can ordinarily be peacefully removed from office. It is not obvious that something similar can be achieved, with little social cost, in a nondemocratic meritocracy. Instead, in such a system, a costly public revolt may be required for the opposition to even discover whether its views are widely held, much less to remove an unpopular government. Absent a convincing case that political meritocracy can peacefully navigate conflict over who has the right to rule, it might not be worth pursuing, even if the preceding criticisms all miss the mark.

Let us recap our discussion of the criticisms of political meritocracy. We have reviewed five such criticisms related to merit's coherence, the demographic objection, rent-seeking, political equality, and social peace. While objections to political meritocracy are typically rooted in the demographic objection and/or political equality, our discussion suggests that the liability related to social peace may be the most difficult to circumvent.

We close the section with three notes about the limits of such critical discussion. First, while objections to political meritocracy are typically rooted in the demographic objection and/or political equality, our discussion suggests that the liability related to social peace may be the most difficult to circumvent. Second, there is little in these objections that speaks to the alleged capacity of political meritocracies to advance longer-horizon policies or avoid the shortcomings associated with an adversarial political process. Third, while we have surveyed arguments about the intrinsic liabilities of political meritocracy, an evaluation of such institutions must ultimately be comparative because no psychologically feasible political regime will be free of shortcomings with respect to, say, political equality or rent-seeking. Future work in this area would benefit from building more deliberately on comparative analysis of institutional mechanisms specific to the relevant institutional arrangements.

CAN EGALITARIAN DEMOCRACIES INCORPORATE MERITOCRACY?

Having considered the various objections to political meritocracies, we next turn to evaluating political meritocrats' critique of egalitarian democracy. In one sense, the critique is surely correct: Few would argue that existing democracies do not display systematic departures from meritorious selection into office and epistemically optimal policymaking. However, as the defenses of political

meritocracy are, in effect, defenses of substantial, even radical, institutional reforms, there is a further, albeit implicit, presupposition of the critique. The presupposition is that little, if any, available internal reform could accomplish the relevant merit-related goals within an institutional framework organized around one person–one vote. This claim is our focus in the present section.

Drawing on existing literature and institutional forms, we detail three prominent spaces for political meritocracy within egalitarian democracy. The examples of institutions—and, concomitantly, resources for improved meritocratic arrangements—that we discuss illustrate the potential of taking onboard the concerns of political meritocrats without abandoning either electoral institutions or a commitment to equal voting rights (see also Macedo 2013, Pettit 2013, He & Warren 2020, Ziliotti 2020).[4]

Nonpartisan Expert Staff

Meritocratic policymaking requires expertise, but access to expertise alone does not imply better policy because it may be co-opted in the service of private or partisan interests. The policymaking process in modern electoral democracies, including legislative action, is, however, often supported by expert staff that aims to transcend the partisan ecosystems. There are multiple distinct institutional models for creating and policing the quality of advice to advance social welfare in a nonpartisan way. In the United States, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) provides politically neutral budget estimates of legislative proposals in the hope that this guidance helps legislators make choices in a more informed and competent manner, more on par with the executive (Joyce 2011). The relative objectivity of experts' claims originating in CBO or similar offices (e.g., Congressional Research Service, Government Accountability Office) is meant to be assured by the nonpartisan status of the office. A different model of expert staff is manifest in Germany, where expert advice is often provided to policymakers via nongovernmental research organizations with strong connections to academic communities (Campbell & Pedersen 2014). The meritocratic aspects of research academia and the concerns for maintaining academic reputation provide a disciplining effect on the quality of expert advice. Both models are, of course, open to manipulation that can undermine their meritocratic elements and their impact on the policymaking process, e.g., via appointment process for the ostensibly nonpartisan offices and government funding for research institutes and foundations. Nonetheless, the institutional levers, including apolitical oversight, counter–political cycle appropriations, and others, can go a considerable distance toward tamping down such manipulation.

Protected Bureaucracy

While the critical portrayal of democracy described in the introduction of this article focused on voters and elected officials, much policymaking in democratic societies occurs via bureaucratic channels, even if those are, to various degrees, overseen by elected officials. In most wealthy democracies, bureaucracy is a meritocratic institution whose members are selected and promoted on competence-based grounds and given a certain measure of job security (civil service protections) to insulate them from political retaliation (Johnson & Libecap 2007, Lewis 2008).

There are two ways in which meritocratic bureaucracy contributes to the sense that electoral democracy is a species of political meritocracy. The first is direct: Insofar as democratic societies differ in the legal and institutional protection and the scope of authority given to bureaucrats, we

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[4]For a review of the literature focusing on the possibility of realizing a high level of epistemic performance under democratic governance without meritocratic institutions, see Schwartzberg (2015).

can think of such societies as being more or less consistent with the aims of political meritocracy. The second sense is indirect: Just as the nonpartisanship of expert staff is its fundamental meritocratic credential alongside knowledge and expertise, the nonpartisanship, or at least apolitical function, of bureaucracies can be seen as a key guarantor of their legitimacy as meritocratic entities (for an account of how the bureaucracy should maintain nonpartisanship even while exercising substantial policy discretion, see Heath 2020). In that vein, meritocratic bureaucracy can exert a positive effect on the choices of elected partisan officials, encouraging them to take more social welfare–oriented actions (Dahlström & Lapuente 2017, Rothstein 2019).[5]

Of course, given the bureaucrats' typically different (longer) effective time horizon than that of the elected officials (Kaufman 1981, Denisenko et al. 2024), the latter face incentives to break down the political insulation of bureaucracy to mobilize it to act in accord with their own immediate political aims. [Indeed, these incentives suggest a note of caution for the expectation of the positive impact of nonpartisan bureaucracy on the social welfare qualities of choices made by elected officials. The nonpartisanship of bureaucracy and its resistance to politicization can feed into the deep-state narrative of populist candidates (Moynihan 2021) and lead them to adopt more stridently partisan and extreme policies.[6] The effect would negate the potentially positive indirect effect described above and undermine the meritocratic potential of electoral selection (see more on electoral selection below)].

If the bureaucracy is organized in accordance with ideals of political meritocracy, then institutional protections against partisan pressure, such as enhanced civil service protections and the creation of independent agencies, are essential for protecting the meritocratic policymaking dimensions of electoral regimes (Oliveira et al. 2024). By helping sustain the broader moderating effect of bureaucracies on effective policy, they are also an important bulwark against populism (Ginsburg & Huq 2020).[7]

Forms of Representative Democracy

If the determination of the normative ends of policies is separable from selection of the best means of advancing those ends (Christiano 1996, pp. 215–19), then electoral democracies may be able to effectively delegate meritocratic elements of the policymaking process to a technocratic arm of government. There are both philosophical and practical reasons to be skeptical of such separability (Heath 2020, pp. 59–65; Landa & Pevnick 2020, pp. 9–10) and, with that, of the possibility of voters' delegating meritocratic selection to unelected experts. Indeed, the distinction that many voters will seek in selecting their representative (Manin 1997) will be one that entails relevant

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[5]In the US context, though, Heclo (2002, p. 692) argues that the right perspective is serial and equal partisanship rather than nonpartisanship. This view appears consistent with the evidence suggesting that the narrative of the deep-state resistance has little systematic support (Lewis 2021, Kucinskas & Zylan 2023). There are, however, structural reasons to think that the ideological motivations of bureaucrats are not altogether irrelevant: Gailmard & Patty's (2007) model of bureaucratic expertise suggests that individual bureaucrats' investments into policy expertise are driven, in part, by their ideological motives.

[6]The analysis of the impact of judicial review by Fox & Stephenson (2011) details the mechanism by which this effect can come about, with equivocal effects on the choices made by elected officials. In this mechanism, bureaucratic actions are strategically equivalent to judicial review in their model.

[7]One can think of the power that the judiciary exerts through judicial review in many existing democracies as implicitly meritocratic. It empowers a set of individuals who come to power, typically, through educational successes at the college and law school levels—often at elite institutions—in a way that allows them to overrule the decisions of democratic majorities. Yet the standard justifications for judicial review differ from justifications for bureaucratic rulemaking in that the former do not typically claim, at least explicitly, that the judiciary should be empowered because of its meritocratic nature.

dimensions of merit. This fact does not make electoral democracies political meritocracies in the strongest sense, as institutions where the most meritorious are on top. But it makes electoral democracies at least compatible with the idea of political meritocracy in a somewhat weaker, but arguably all-around more plausible, sense. In particular, one can think of them as containing selection mechanisms that systematically correct apparent failures to track merit in a prior selection.

Indeed, the election of representatives—arguably the *sine qua non* of modern democracy—was, historically, prominently defended on the basis of meritocratic considerations. A central feature of the justification for such systems emphasized by James Madison and Thomas Jefferson was that well-designed elections would allow citizens to select those who are particularly well-suited to hold political office (because of their knowledge, their judgment, their virtue, etc.). More generally, one can think of elections as meritocratic devices from the perspective of selection and treatment (Landa & Pevnick 2020). From the perspective of selection, elections can be meritocratic if they can be arranged so that winners are citizens who are distinctively well-positioned to serve as effective political leaders (Besley 2006, Ashworth & Bueno de Mesquita 2008, Dal Bó & Finan 2018). From the perspective of treatment, elections can be meritocratic if the desire for reelection induces those who are chosen to act in a more careful, competent, and publicly spirited manner than would ordinary citizens in a system of direct democracy (Anesi & Buisseret 2022, Acharya et al. 2024). There is some evidence of both of these mechanisms at work in modern democratic systems (e.g., Alt et al. 2011, Dal Bó et al. 2017).

Much of the institutional political economy literature over the last two decades has focused on identifying properties of institutional forms with respect to their ability to create effective accountability and enable the selection of meritorious candidates. Among others, these institutional forms include different electoral campaign finance regimes (Ashworth 2006, Prat et al. 2010, Iaryczower & Mattozzi 2012) and electoral systems (Myerson 1999, Buisseret et al. 2022), institutional determinants of incumbency advantage (Gordon & Landa 2009), limits on the number of terms in office (Alt et al. 2011, Smart & Sturm 2013), the extent of bundling of the policymaking authority (Ashworth & Bueno de Mesquita 2017, Landa & Le Bihan 2018), the salaries of elected officials (Gagliarducci & Nannicini 2013, Dal Bó et al. 2017), and others. While meritocratic selection into office and political accountability need not go hand-in-hand (Ashworth et al. 2017), the institutional features that these studies identify help make the characteristics of incumbents that are relevant to merit-based selection (particular types of competence, integrity, judgment, temperament, etc.) more transparent to voters, facilitating both the selection of more meritorious incumbents and stronger incentives for more meritorious candidates to run for public office.

A different approach focuses on improving the deliberative side of the electoral connection. One of the key reasons for departures from meritocratic electoral selection is that the relevant dimensions of office candidates' merit may not be perfectly correlated with the observable candidate attributes that appear focal to the voters. A major structural factor that helps explain this imperfect correlation is the informational asymmetry between voters and office candidates, especially incumbents. This asymmetry can support incentives, even for superior candidates, to pander to voters' potentially mistaken prior beliefs (Canes-Wrone et al. 2001, Maskin & Tirole 2004), leading to both less meritocratic selection into office and inferior policymaking. A further exacerbating consideration is that, to effectively defend their policy choices, office candidates may require of the voters the kind of attention span that is often difficult to obtain, especially with the advent of instantaneous social media–based communication that diverts attention away from the policymakers and toward lateral communication with members of one's network (Landa & Pevnick 2025). This consideration underscores the value of better understanding determinants, including, in particular, institutional determinants, of meaningful deliberative engagement within electoral democracies.

Heo & Landa (2024) analyze how such engagement is affected by the leeway that incumbents have to explain their policy choices to constituents and the impact of that leeway on meritocratic candidate selection. A series of empirical studies suggest the promise of small-setting, in-person deliberative exchanges, such as town hall–style meetings with elected officials (Neblo et al. 2018) and deliberative polls (e.g., Fishkin 2018), as ways of enabling citizens to guide policymaking under something closer to full information than what is likely to emerge otherwise. In a different kind of discussion of the optimal organization of public deliberation, Thoma (2024) argues for the importance of social scientific measures that can inform policy debate without presupposing controversial value judgments.

A somewhat greater departure from existing representative democratic institutions, but one that is still consistent with the principle of political equality at the core of one person–one vote, is to establish alternative, more popularly/democratically grounded, pathways to meritocracy (Latimer 2018). An interesting possibility here is liquid democracy, an institution that has been gaining popularity in the literature at the intersection of computer science, computational social choice, and democratic theory (Blum & Zuber 2016, Kahng et al. 2021). The central rule of liquid democracy envisions each voter individually choosing whether to delegate (or, at any point, take back the delegation of) their vote to another voter of their choice whose weight in the voting decision would then reflect their accumulation of entrusted votes. The idea is that voters may wish to delegate to someone they perceive to be better informed or otherwise more capable to make a better choice on the matter in question. This institution is, in a sense, a way of democratizing weighted voting, promising, similarly, the benefit of more meritocratic policymaking from placing voting choice in the hands of better prepared voters while avoiding some of the liabilities that we discussed above (for a critical perspective, see Landa & Pevnick 2025, chapter 5).

Complications

The meritocratic practices within systems based on the principle of one person–one vote suggest that the picture of democracy that often underlies the intuitive appeal of political meritocracies as alternative regime types may be notably crude. Policymaking in existing, and even more so institutionally optimized, electoral democracies is not merely enacting the untutored desires of the median voter. Instead, policymaking in such regimes (*a*) is often insulated from such desires in a way that allows expertise to affect, if not dictate, policy; (*b*) is framed by institutional rules and incentives that affect voters' beliefs; and (*c*) can be accompanied by strategically complex speech acts affecting those beliefs.

These details of the policymaking process, however, give rise to the concern that representative democracies may themselves be vulnerable to some of the criticisms to which political meritocracy is subject. Indeed, some scholars worry that policymaking in representative democracies has effectively been captured by the intellectual elite (e.g., Bovens & Wille 2017, Pasquali 2021). As Bovens & Wille (2017) point out, in Western European democracies,

> Citizens with low or medium educational qualification levels currently make up approximately 70 per cent of the electorate, yet they are virtually absent from cabinets, parliaments, and, for that matter, from most other political arenas. This dominance of well-educated citizens may lead to an 'exclusion bias' in politics, in which particular types of opinions are not represented. (pp. 5–6)

The broader concerns that animate Bovens and Wille's work also underlie some of the appeal of populist figures: namely, that the various institutions and mechanisms through which existing representative democracies incorporate expert input also enable a small segment of the population (namely, the well-educated) to dominate policymaking. These concerns are mirrored in the issues discussed above in connection with the demographic objection and rent-seeking. Whether

these concerns should lead to a rejection of meritocratic mechanisms within representative democracy or to attempts to strengthen them to shore up failures of meritocratic selection remains undertheorized.

The rise of direct-democratic practices as well as related institutions, such as term limits and recall procedures, may be seen as a reaction to such concerns. These institutions effectively create democratic short circuits that circumvent the existing, and potentially meritocratic, practices and mechanisms built into representative democracies. They make it more likely that democracies will, in fact, enact the untutored preferences of the median voter. Two features of this effect are noteworthy here. First, it could either constrain meritocracy (in circumstances in which they undermine meritocratic practices or mechanisms within representative democracies) or advance meritocratic principles (in circumstances in which private interests have captured policymaking). In this sense, reactions to perceived electoral failures of meritocratic selection—failures that could be real or imagined—may correct, but may also institutionally overcorrect, the selection mechanisms. And second, given the incomplete and asymmetrically distributed information that characterizes the relationship between citizens and officeholders, both term limits and recall procedures clearly come with the possibility of false negatives from the standpoint of advancing political meritocracy, potentially dismissing the more meritorious candidates for the less meritorious ones. Taken together, these features underscore the uneasy relationship between meritocracy and popular sovereignty that complicates the interpretation of popular responses to (imperfectly) meritocratic institutions.

Stepping back from these complications, our survey of the key mechanisms that enable meritocratic decision-making within representative democracies suggests further critical points as well. While these mechanisms speak to the concerns about competence raised by political meritocrats, the extant literature does not directly respond to their other criticisms of democratic regimes— the tendency of such regimes to focus on short-term considerations and their proclivity toward polarization. The former may be mitigated in the presence of strong political parties that are concerned about their reputations and may sometimes be able to push incumbents to think beyond the next election (Rosenbluth & Shapiro 2018, but see Chapman 2023 for recent skepticism). Whether representative democracies can be designed to avoid the ills of polarization is, meanwhile, far from clear; indeed, this criticism from the political meritocrats is probably the most difficult to resist, though it has (perhaps as a result?) been largely ignored in the literature.

CONCLUSION

This article has surveyed the recent literature on political meritocracy. We began by locating the appeal of political meritocracy in an analysis of democratic societies that sees them as dangerously resting policymaking authority in the hands of an ignorant and broadly incompetent citizenry. In response to such concerns, two families of political meritocrats have emerged. One explores the appeal of institutions organized around the ideal of nondemocratic meritocracy and the other of forms of weighted voting that would attempt to allocate political power in accordance with competence. The attractiveness of both forms of political meritocracy is centrally tied to their putative ability to allocate political power to a more qualified set of decision-makers. However, as we have detailed, such proposals face a number of important concerns, including, in particular, concerns about their vulnerability to rent-seeking, political inequality, and social unrest.

After considering the details of political meritocracies as alternatives to electoral democracies, we turned to the spaces and prospects for political meritocracy within the latter and argued that the distinction between political meritocracy and egalitarian democracy is overdrawn. Many institutions within democratic regimes can help develop, and make effective use of, needed expertise.

In this sense, the picture of democratic regimes on which political meritocracy's appeal depends appears to be something of a caricature. The real, and important, issue pressed to the fore by political meritocrats may, then, be how democratic societies can be arranged to use expertise effectively without, at the same time, becoming vulnerable to the very liabilities that undermine political meritocracy's appeal. While we have tried to point to a number of avenues for thinking about this issue, it is one that, moving forward, would benefit from the more careful attention of those working in democratic theory.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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