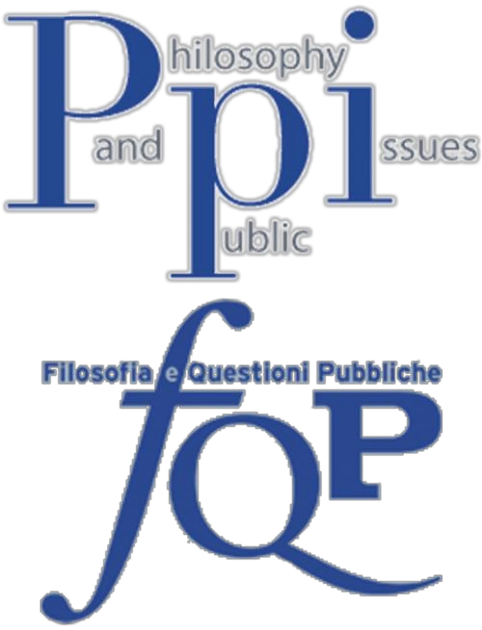
SYMPOSIUM

THE CHINA MODEL



THE MORAL BASIS OF POLITICAL MERITOCRACY

BY

ELENA ZILIOTTI

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The Moral Basis of Political Meritocracy

Elena Zilliotti

Political meritocracy is the view that members of the legislative branch must be chosen and promoted on the basis of their individual skills, character and performance. Democratic and meritocratic theories differ from one another not in the types of political agencies that they support, but in the governmental body to which meritocratic selection criteria apply. Several democratic theories require selecting the members of the judiciary branch through meritocratic mechanisms, but only meritocratic theories allow for the extension of meritocratic selection principles to the composition of the legislature.[1]

In practice, political meritocracy is compatible with democratic institutions in various ways. Recently, Daniel A. Bell has argued

[1] For a defense of meritocratic selection systems outside the legislative branch, see Stephen Macedo's constitutional theory of democracy, where judiciary review and regulatory agencies are insulated from direct electoral accountabilities (Stephen Macedo, "Meritocratic Democracy: Learning from the American Constitution," in Bell D. and Li C. (eds.), *The East Asian Challenge for Democracy: Political Meritocracy in Comparative Perspective*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013, 232−256). Also Philip Pettit claims that a democratic system of a large modern society requires establishing meritocratic agencies to resolve matters in the specific domains in which people's preferences are quite clear (Philip Pettit, "Meritocratic Representation", Bell D. and Li C. (eds.), *The East Asian Challenge for Democracy: Political Meritocracy in Comparative Perspective*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013, 147).

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for a political system for modern China, in which democratic institutions operate only at the local political level, while meritocratic mechanisms function at the national level.[2] Tongdong Bai (2013), Bell (2006) and Joseph Chan (2014; 2013) propose a bicameral system in which meritocratic selection mechanisms choose the members of the upper house, which has the strongest legislative power, while the members of the lower house are chosen by democratic mechanisms.[3] Another view is that democratic institutions must have a final say on the choice of the legislative and meritocratic selection and promotion mechanisms of the leaders can be deployed to balance democratic institutions by ensuring a further check on the leadership's abilities and effectiveness of the government in relation to the achievement of long-term collective interests (e.g. climate change, security, the use of natural resources, the development of a forward-looking education system).[4]

Whether we value political meritocracy as an overarching principle of governance or as an auxiliary mechanism to improve

[2] Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). A similar philosophical theory of government is developed by Tongdong Bai in "A Mencian Version of Limited Democracy" (*Res Publica*, Vol. 14, 2008), 19−34.

[3] Tongdong Bai, "A Confucian Version of Hybrid Regime: How Does It Work, and Why Is It Superior?" (Bell D. and Li C. (eds.), *The East Asian Challenge for Democracy: Political Meritocracy in Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 55−87. Daniel A. Bell, B*eyond Liberal Democracy: Political Thinking for an East Asian Context* (Princeton: Princeton University Press). Joseph Chan, "Political Meritocracy and Meritorious Rule: A Confucian Perspective" (Bell D. and Li C. (eds.), *The East Asian Challenge for Democracy: Political Meritocracy in Comparative Perspective*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 31−54.

[4] I defend this view in the piece: "From Democratic Meritocracy to Meritocratic Democracy: Why Political Meritocracy matters," in this Volume.

a democratic decision-making process, the moral justification for meritocratic distributions of legislative power needs to be formulated. Specifically, what gives the most competent and meritorious the right to rule? This is a crucial question for any meritocratic theory which aims to be taken seriously *as* a political principle by Western scholars. Meritocratic measures are mostly defended in relation to democracy's lack of effectiveness, but the reason why political outcomes should matter more than other criteria in the first place is open to question. In fact, non-instrumental defenses of democracy are very popular in the Western context. Some egalitarians contend that democratic institutions are intrinsically good regardless of their outcomes, because they embody the moral equality of the citizens,[5] while others maintain that democracy is necessary for achieving equality.[6] In contrast, deliberative theorists believe that democracy is the only legitimate form of governance, because

[5] Harry Brighouse, "Egalitarianism and equal availability of political influence" (*The Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol. 4, Issue 2, 1996), 118–141. Thomas Christiano, *The Rule of the Many: Fundamental Issues in Democratic Theory* (Boulder: Westview Press 1996); "Is democracy merely a means to social justice?" (Reeve A. and Williams A. (eds.), *Real Libertarianism Assessed*: *political theory after Van Parijs*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 172−200. "Debate: Estlund on Democratic Authority" (*Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol. 17, Issue 2, 2009), 228–240. Christopher Griffin, "Democracy as a Non-Instrumentally Just Procedure" (*Journal of Political Philosophy,* Vol. 111, Issue 1, 2003), 111–121.

[6] Elisabeth Anderson, "What is the Point of Equality?" *(Ethics*, Vol. 103, Issue 9, 1999), 287−337; "Democracy: Instrumental vs. Non-Instrumental Value" (*Contemporary Debates in Political Philosophy*, Christiano T. and Christman J. (eds.), Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 213−227. Samuel Scheffler, "What is Egalitarianism?" (*Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol. 31, Issue 1, 2003), 5−39. Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defence of Pluralism and Equality* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1983). Niko Kolodny, "Rule Over None II: Social Equality and the Justification of Democracy," *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol. 42, Issue 4, 2004, 287–336).

only democracy can provide people a place to develop their preferences and a fair opportunity to influence the decisional outcome.[7] Thus, as contemporary meritocratic theories aim to go beyond a Confucian perspective to reach out to a broader audience, a justification of political meritocracy based on some fundamental Western values must be articulated.[8]

By relating the notion of political meritocracy to the debate on equality of opportunity, this paper illustrates that political meritocracy can be understood as the expression of a principle of substantive equality of political opportunity. I claim that two main tenets should characterize the ideal of political meritocracy:

[7] Joshua Cohen, "Deliberation and democratic legitimacy" (Hamlin A. and Pettit P. (eds.), *The Good Polity*, New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 17−34. "Democratic equality" (*Ethics,* Vol. 99, Issue 4, 1989), 727−751. "Procedure and substance in deliberative democracy" (Benhabib S. (eds.), *Democracy and Difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 95−119. "For a Democratic Society" (*The Cambridge Companion to Rawls*, in Freeman S (eds.), Cambridge MA: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 86–138. John Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). Jurgen Habermas, "Reconciliation through the Public use of Reason: Remarks on John Rawls's Political Liberalism" (*The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 92,1995), 109−31. *Between Facts and Norms* (Cambridge, MIT Press,1996). "Three Normative Models of Democracy," (S. Benhabib (eds.), *Democracy and Difference,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 21−30.

[8] This does not exclude the fact that the Confucian justification of meritocratic selection systems remains contested. One criticism is that it is unclear whether the Confucian conception of 'wisdom' and 'moral worthiness' can be stretched to include the 'expert-knowledge' advocated by defenders of political meritocracy (Tan Sor-hoon, "Beyond Elitism: A Community Ideal for Modern East Asia," *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 59, No. 4, 2009, 544. Sungmoon Kim, *Confucian Democracy in East Asia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 80).

on the one hand, political meritocracy requires selecting and promoting candidates based on their performance, qualities, and skills that are relevant to the political positions; and on the other hand, it ought to provide people with equal chances to develop these abilities and expertise. As such, political meritocracy can compete on an equal footing with another interpretation of the principle of substantive equality of political opportunity, namely *democratic equality of fair opportunity*.

Another reason why the assessment of political meritocracy from an egalitarian standpoint should concern proponents of Confucian meritocracy is that political meritocracy can be considered a threat to equality, because it denies the equal competence of other people to rule and justifies the domination of a minority in society.[9] On the contrary, I argue that in some socio-economic contexts, egalitarians can have *reasons* to support some forms of political meritocracy, if these provide better outcomes. However, no member of society can make a *claim* to political office on the basis of her individual merits.

Section 1 starts by exploring how Western literature has associated the idea of merit with the principle of 'equality of opportunity'. In Section 2, a conception of political meritocracy is developed as an interpretation of the idea of 'substantive equality of opportunity'. Finally, Section 3 shows that egalitarians have reasons to support meritocratic mechanisms, if they can provide better political outcomes than alternative institutional forms.

[9] Tan Sor-hoon, "Beyond Elitism: A Community Ideal for Modern East Asia" (*Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 59, No. 4, 2009), 537.

I

Equality of opportunity

Merit concerns the *qualities* that an individual possesses. It differs from the concept of desert in that deserts are attributed to the individual's *deeds*.[10] Merit is a *forward-looking* ideal; when we attribute merit to people, we usually think that they possess some qualifications that make them suitable for carrying out some tasks in the future.[11] On the contrary, desert-based judgments are *backward-looking*. When we perform desert-judgments, we believe that an individual deserves something based on what she did or achieved in the past.[12]

However, in practice, most of our merit-based judgments take past deeds as predictors of merit. They aim to identify the individual's future performances on the basis of her past deeds. For example, an employer can believe that the candidate's previous experiences and achievements provide sufficient evidence of her qualities. Thus, our merit-based judgments are usually *ceteris paribus* judgments: we believe that, with other conditions remaining the same, the individual's performance will be as good as in the past.[13]

[10] John Lucas, *Responsibility* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 125.
[11] David Miller, *Principles of Social Justice* (Cambridge MASS: Harvard University Press 1999), 137.
[12] *Ibid.,* the concept of merit is also *context-sensitivite*. As John Rawls points out, whether somebody has merit partly depends on the social context in which is evaluated (*A Theory of Justice*, revised edition, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971/1999, 82−87). For instance, knowing how to cook excellent Argentinean asados may not be valued in a vegetarian society, but the same ability can be highly praised in a carnivore society.
[13] *Ibid.,*

In Western literature, the idea of merit is typically associated with the principle of *equality of opportunity* (EO for short). This principle builds on the assumption that the well-functioning of modern complex societies requires societies to adopt some division of labor. Distinct positions in this divisional order tend to entail different social advantages, such as prestige, remuneration and social power. From an egalitarian standpoint, the need of such order, together with the unequal allocation of social advantages that are tied to it, raises the question of how such allocation can be fair to all citizens.

To address this problem, EO aims to distinguish morally justified socio-economic structures from unacceptable ones. This is done by equalizing the chances of getting a position for everyone who seeks it. Thus, in general, EO maintains that "each must face an array of options that is equivalent to every other person in terms of the prospects for preference satisfaction it offers".[14] One conceptualization of EO is *formal equality of opportunity* (or career open to talents). This principle states that a differentiated order is fair to the extent that it allocates socially advantaged positions on the basis of merit. Formal equality of opportunity maintains that a) positions and posts with superior social advantages should be open to all members of society; b) applicants are assessed in relation to their merits; and c) the posts must be assigned to the applicants with relevant superior qualities.

The idea of formal equality of opportunity is non-discriminatory compared to alternative hierarchical structures or orders that allocate social advantages based on gender, social connections, race or religion. However, in a society characterized

[14] Richard Arneson, "Equality and Equal opportunity for Welfare" (*Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 56, 1989), 85.

by socio-economic inequalities, formal equality of opportunity fails to guarantee substantive equal opportunity. The upbringing and the socioeconomic and political circumstances in which individuals happen to live are paramount aspects for the development of one's own talents. Thus, although the principle recognizes that all individuals have equal chances to obtain a certain position, it ignores the fact that typically the members of a society have different starting-point in the race for that position. Under these circumstances, the implementation of formal equality of opportunity risks justifying the perpetuation of old discredited hierarchies and social inequalities.[15]

The principle of *substantive equality of opportunity* aims to overcome the paradoxical consequences of formal equality of opportunity. According to this idea, the achievement of EO requires not only a meritocratic selection system but also that a genuine opportunity to become qualified is presented to all members of the society. This latter idea, *equality of access*, is meant

[15] This pejorative effect of formal equality of opportunity was first highlighted by Bernard Williams. Williams imagines a hypothetical society that is governed by a class of wealthy warriors. At some point, to mitigate the increasing popular dissatisfaction with the current elitist rule, the warriors decide that the future leaders will not be picked in relation to their family ties anymore, but solely in relation to their physical strength. In this new setting, formal equality of opportunity is finally achieved: now all members of society are recognized and given the same chance to become a ruler if they wish so. However, little would change in the composition of the ruling class—Williams argues—if only the wealthiest warrior families can provide their children with enough nourishment to develop and exhibit superior physical strength ("The Ideal of Equality", reprinted in *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Antology*, R. E. Goodin and Pettit P. (eds.), Oxford: Blackwell, 1962/1997, 451−461).

to prevent advantages or disadvantages for which the recipient cannot legitimately be held responsible.[16]

The ideal of substantive equality of opportunity is widely accepted,[17] but the principle of *equality of access* remains highly contested. One main point of contention is that it is hard to identify the sufficient level of possibilities to develop relevant qualities. In this regard, John Rawls proposes the principle of *fair equality of opportunity* as a benchmark to assess the achievement of equality of access in society. This principle states that equality of access is achieved only when the members of society with the same native talents and the same ambition have equal prospects of success in relation to competitions for positions.[18] Fair equality of opportunity aims to correct formal equality of opportunity by requiring equal chances for the individuals to become equally well-endowed regardless of social contingencies. In Rawls' account, society ought to develop the structural conditions to 'level the playing field' among individuals during their period of formation. "Free market arrangements must be set within a framework of political and legal institutions which regulates the overall trends of economic events and preserves the social conditions necessary for fair equality of opportunity. […] so the

[16] Andrew Mason, "Equality of Opportunity, Old and New" (*Ethics*, Vol. 111, 2001), 762.

[17] One exception to this is Antony Flew, who claims that open competitions for scarce opportunities are sufficient for equality of opportunity, as long as no one is excluded from the competition and the same rule applies to all candidates. (*The Politics of Procrustes: contradictions of Enforced equality*, London: Temple Smith, 1981), 45.

[18] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (revised edition, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971/1999), 63.

school system, whether public or private, should be designed to even out class barrier".[19]

II

Political Meritocracy as a Principle of Substantive Equality of Political Opportunity

The functioning of large societies depends not only on a division of labor, but also on the division of political power. Complex and modern societies need a political system which is characterized by "uneven control of political resources".[20] For this reason, any large modern society needs to distribute political power unequally among its members. This suggests that similar questions to the ones concerning the allocation of social positions apply to the division of political power among the members of a society. Indeed, if the existence of political inequalities is unavoidable, the identification of morally justified inequality of political power is in order.

One way is to apply the idea of substantive equality of opportunity to the political dimension. Traditionally, the interpretation of this principle—*democratic equality of fair opportunity*—calls for equalizing everyone's chances to both influence political decisions and stand for office if one seeks it, and for choosing candidates on the basis of free and fair elections.[21] The idea of democratic equality of fair opportunity implies that: a) the candidates who deserve to rule are those who

[19] *Ibid*., 63.

[20] Robert Dahl and Bruce Stinebrickner, *Modern political Analysis* (Upper Saddle River NJ: Pearson, 1991), 52−53.

[21] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (revised edition, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 194−197.

obtain the most votes in elections (or those who have been appointed by law-makers elected according to such rules); b) all adult citizens have genuine access to gain the qualities and conditions needed to compete in elections; and c) all adult citizens have an equal right to participate in elections if they so wish.[22]

Another interpretation of the principle of substantive equality of political opportunity is to select candidates based on the qualities and skills that are relevant to the political positions and provide the members of society with equal chances to develop these abilities and expertise—*political meritocracy*. For the principle of political meritocracy, the most meritorious candidates are not the ones who enjoy stronger public support, but rather those who have the skills and abilities to carry out the specific political job in the best way possible. Political meritocracy is compatible with political liberties, such as freedom of speech and association, freedom of thought and right to hold office. However, it is incompatible with the right to vote when this is understood as means to the selection of the leadership. Political meritocracy is thereby underpinned by a different conception of how a 'government for the people' should be achieved than democracy. If democracy can be defined as 'the government *of* the people, *for* the people, and *by* the people,' because it requires the direct involvement of some of the citizens—or their representatives—in the decision-making process, political meritocracy can be considered 'the government *of* the people, *for* the people, but *not*

[22] A political system based on these criteria parallels the definition of democracy as "political equality and public control on the initial stage of the decision-making process" which is accepted by many Anglophone democratic theorists. (David Beetham, "Democracy: universality and diversity", *Ethics & Global Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 4, 2009, 281).

by the people,' as only those who have been chosen through a meritocratic selection system can participate in the decision-making process.

As a principle of substantive equality of political opportunity, political meritocracy entails equality of access to acquire relevant qualities. This latter is crucial to ensure truly meritocracy; in its absence, meritocratic selection would generate an unfair distribution of political power, because in practice allocation of political power would depend more on advantages or disadvantages for which the recipient cannot legitimately be held responsible (such as parents' income and her social position) than her merit. The claim that equality of access is a constitutive part of the concept of political meritocracy distinguishes my conception of political meritocracy from some contemporary meritocratic theories. For example, Bell acknowledges that "[p]olitical meritocracy depends on high degree of economic equality"[23] and argues for political measures to curb unjustified socio-economic inequalities, such as quotas in elite universities for students from disadvantaged social backgrounds. But, at the same time, he also maintains that these measures despite being necessary "conflict with the aim of meritocratic selection that is blind to social background".[24] Contrary to Bell, according to my conception of political meritocracy, political measures like the above example are an expression of what meritocracy requires in practice.

The relevance of equal opportunity for education to my conception of political meritocracy is clear: education is the paramount means through which an individual can acquire the

[23] Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 132.
[24] *Ibid*., 131.

relevant skills and knowledge to compete in the allocation of several political positions. Hence, society should guarantee to their citizens equal opportunities for education right from the start of their educational training, not only at the university level. Political meritocracy does not require neutralizing undeserved inequalities in education at the cost of levelling down the education of the children of better-off families. Education is one of the essential spheres of human life for an individual to flourish, as such society ought to provide the children of non-wealthy parents with the same advantages as those of wealthy families, without depriving the children of wealthy families. This can be achieved, for example, by allocating more public funding to public schools or schools in poor neighborhoods.

A concept of equal opportunity to acquire the relevant qualities is crucial for political meritocracy to defend itself from the accusations of elitism. Political meritocracy has often been accused of being an elitist idea.[25] Some meritocrats also misidentified themselves as elitist, generating harsh criticisms.[26] In general, to prevent elitism, political meritocracy should comply with civil and individual rights, freedom of the press and associations. Political decisions should also be transparent and publicly justified. However, the objective functionality of the institutions and the meritocratic selection is insufficient to avoid elitism. Suppose that it was agreed that academic records are one of the standards against which leaders should be chosen. Under these conditions, most likely a society that deploys some forms of

[25] Michael Young, *The Rise of Meritocracy 1870-2033: An Essay on Education and Equality* (London: Northumberland Press, 1958).
[26] Daniel A. Bell, B*eyond Liberal Democracy: Political Thinking for an East Asian Context* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); for a response, see Tan So-hoon, "Beyond Elitism: A Community Ideal for a Modern East Asia" (*Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 59, Issue 4, 2009), 537−553.

meritocratic selection to choose its leaders according to academic record would generate a homogeneous elite if only the wealthiest can get access to the best education and training. Thus, equality of opportunity to acquire the qualities that are assessed by the meritocratic selection is essential for any meritocratic project.

One question we might ask about the account I have given of political meritocracy is whether the superior political power of leaders that have been chosen by meritocratic procedures would express superior social status. Put in another way, can the denial of an equal share of decisional power over the basic ground rules of social life be a public declaration of a second-class citizenry? [27] The answer is no. First of all, this argument presupposes the peculiarity of political relations. After all, not all inequalities of power and authority which derived from non-democratic means are necessarily controversial. Many of us accept inequalities of power and authority, such as those in parent-child, teacher-student or team captain-team members relationships, where power has been distributed through non-democratic means, but those with more power and authority are expected to exercise them in the interests of all parties and in respectful ways. Thus, at least in some cases, the unequal distribution of decisional power does not mean a lowering of status for some persons who have less. Despite her lower decisional power, the student can still be equally respected, listened to, welcomed by her own teacher. This suggests that perhaps what makes an unequal distribution of power disrespectful depends more on *how* those with extra power use their favorable position and the *rationale* of a distribution of power than the inequality of decisional power in itself.

[27] Christopher Griffin makes a similar point in defense of political equality in "Democracy as a Non-Instrumentally Just Procedure" (*Journal of Political Philosophy,* Vol. 111, Issue 1, 2003), 120.

However, it is also true that power seems to work differently in practice. It is difficult to deny that even in some Western democratic societies, some people with more power (whether political or otherwise) often treat the others as inferior. The question of how political meritocracy can counter this trend is beyond the scope of this paper. However, we can suppose that practices of political meritocracy call for a political discourse that emphasizes the equal dignity of all honest persons and jobs and does not put politicians on a pedestal. A political debate that equates political meritocracy with the selection of 'the most talented' or 'the smartest' can generate negative feelings in the public, making the rest feel as though 'they are not got enough'. This language can also cultivate in the leaders the dangerous belief that they are 'better than the others', fostering thereby their attitude of elitism.[28] As community leaders, politicians should set an example by making clear that their talents may be crucial for the society but not worthier than the ones that each member of the community employs in her occupations. Of course, some jobs are more fundamental for the well-being of the community than others, but as long as one contributes to the well-functioning of the community or its material and cultural progress, she deserves equal respect from her fellow citizens. Politicians should also express their respect for other talents and occupations through facts. One example could be the introduction of caps for the

[28] According to Benjamin Wong, a similar rhetoric is partially responsible for the attitude of elitism of many top public servants and leaders in Singapore. "Talented Singaporeans are told that they are sought after by the top global companies in the relentless war for talent. As top public servants are constantly compared with successful professionals in the private sector, they come to believe that they are part of a global elite" ("Political Meritocracy in Singapore", Bell D. & Li C. (eds), *The East Asian Challenge for Democracy*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013, 300).

salary of politicians to curb distress in the public. Some may worry that in the absence of competing salaries, politics will fail to attract and retain talents, who will therefore join the private sector. But this argument is wrong. First of all, enforcing caps does not exclude the possibility for leaders to receive a generous remuneration. Second, government needs to attract a different type of candidates than business enterprises. Serving the interest of the people and not salary ought to be the main motivation to join politics. Thus, those who prioritizes salary over moral responsibility are clearly unsuitable to be a political leader. Hence, caps can even function as selection mechanisms to identify the candidates that are truly fit for political leadership.

III

Egalitarian reasons for Political Meritocracy

The conception of political meritocracy above competes on equal basis with the principle of democratic equality of fair opportunity, but how egalitarians ought to choose between these alternative principles remains unclear. In particular, can egalitarians have a moral justification to prefer meritocratic mechanisms over the expression of democratic equality of fair opportunity? To answer this question an investigation on the meaning of 'egalitarianism' and its implications is in order.

An egalitarian is somebody who cares about equality in itself.[29] This distinguishes egalitarianism, so understood, from another instrumental understanding of equality, which values equality

[29] Nils Holtung and Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen, *Egalitarianism*: *New Essays on the Nature and Value of Equality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2; Shlomi Segall, *Equality and Opportunity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 31; Larry Temkin, *Inequality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 7.

insofar as it promotes other valuable ideas.[30] The belief in the intrinsic value of equality does not constrain egalitarians to care only about equality. Egalitarians may believe that there are other intrinsically valuable ideas besides equality. For this reason, several egalitarians have claimed to be *pluralistic* about values.[31]

Some may contend that more than being concerned with equality in itself, an egalitarian should comply with the *basic equality thesis*. This is the idea that all human beings have equal moral status and should be treated equally or as equals in some respects. However, it is unclear whether the basic equality thesis is egalitarian in the proper sense of the term, because it is part of political theories that are usually considered to be not egalitarians, such as John Locke's theory of natural law.

The basic equality thesis also has controversial metaphysical foundations. It is unclear what exactly people have in common such that they have equal moral status. Some scholars have tried to justify the equal moral standing of human beings by relating it to the existence of morally significant *properties* that individuals possess equally. For example, following Aristotle, Jeff McMahan and James Griffin have argued that *rationality* is the main significant moral property.[32] However, this view either proves too much, by attributing equal moral status to nonhuman animals, or

[30] Larry Temkin, "Illuminating egalitarianism" (*Contemporary Debates in Political Philosophy*, Christiano T. and Christman J. (eds.), Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2009), 159.

[31]Larry Temkin, *Inequality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 7. Also, notice that a pluralist who believes that both equality and utility matter can be a non-instrumental and instrumental egalitarian at the same time, although she must accept some kind of hierarchy of principles.

[32] Jeff McMahan, "Challenges to Human Equality" (*The Journal of Ethics*, Vol. 12, Issue 1, 2008), 81−104. James Griffin, *On Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

it proves too little because it clashes with our intuitions that children, people with disabilities and normal-functioning adults have equal moral status.

The question of what 'striving for equality' means comes down to which scheme of distributional equality best treats people as equals. In other words, "[w]hat aspects of a person's condition should count in a *fundamental* way for egalitarians, and not merely as cause of or evidence of or proxy for what they regard as fundamental?".[33] This question has been the object of one of the richest and most vibrant debates in the egalitarian tradition. The so called 'equality of what?' debate hosts many candidates that include: equality of resources, equality of human relationships (or relational egalitarianism)[34], equality of capability and equality of welfare and opportunity for welfare.[35] The

[33] Gerald Cohen, *On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice, and Other Essays in Political Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 3.

[34] Relational egalitarians refuse to consider themselves as proponents of a distributive account of equality. They claim that equality is "a moral ideal governing the relations in which people stand to one another" (Samuel Scheffler, *Equality and Tradition: Questions of Value in Moral and Political Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, 191). However, this ideal of equality is not categorically different from the distributive ones. Being treated as an equal, being respected and listened are things that happen to individuals. The quality of social relations can be thereby described as a form of distributive egalitarianism where equal relations among citizens is the most important metric of equality (Marc Fleurbaey, *Fairness, Responsibility, and Welfare*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 246).

[35] For a defense of equality of resources see Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); On equality of human relations, see Elisabeth Anderson, "What is the Point of Equality?" (*Ethics*, Vol. 103, Issue 9, 1999), 287−337; Samuel Scheffler, "What is Egalitarianism?" (*Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol. 31, Issue 1, 2003), 5−39; and Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defence of Pluralism and Equality* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1983). The main defenses of equality of capabilities have been developed by

relevance of this debate is at least twofold: on the one hand, it sheds light on the egalitarian ideal of justice, and on the other, it is motivated by the fact that equality of one kind often requires inequality of another. The debate is extremely complex and voluminous and an accurate analysis of this debate is beyond the scope of this paper. In the following paragraphs, I will assume that *equal opportunity for welfar*e is the most valuable dimension for equality. This position is not extremely controversial, as the kind of equality which I am going to defend is also accepted by most egalitarians.

Unlike the ideas of equality of resources and equality of capabilities, the conception of equality of opportunity for welfare is grounded in a concern for people leading genuinely good lives. The principle claims that people must have equal opportunities to obtain welfare or well-being; "each must face an array of options that is equivalent to every other person's in terms of the prospects for preference satisfaction it offers".[36] The lack of

Amartya Sen in "Equality of What?" (S. McMurrin (eds.), *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, Vol. 1, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, reprinted in Sen A., *Choice, Welfare and Measurement,* Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982), 353–369 and *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge MASS: Harvard University Press, 2009) and Martha Nussbaum, "Nature, Functioning and Capability: Aristotle on Political Distribution" (*Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, Vol. 6, 1988), 145–84; "Human Functioning and Social justice. In defense of Aristotelian essentialism" (*Political Theory*, Vol. 20, Issue 2, 1992), 202–246; *Creating Capabilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). For some of the most influential defenses of equal opportunity for welfare, see Richard Arneson, "Equality and Equal opportunity for Welfare" (*Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 56, 1989), 77−93; and Gerald Cohen "On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice," *Ethics*, Vol. 99, Issue 4, 1989), 906−944.

[36]The preferences that serve as a measure of the individual's welfare are "hypothetical considered preferences": the one the individual would have if she were to engage in thoroughgoing calm deliberation about her preferences

consensus in modern pluralistic societies on what well-being or welfare really is makes it difficult to establish a conception of welfare that could serve as a shared standard to help governments identify the individuals' choices that should be supported by the allocated resources.[37] But notwithstanding their differences, alternative conceptions of welfare can still have something in common and this can be used as a guiding principle for policy development. Thus, one way to overcome the disagreement is to outline a basic notion of welfare that is acceptable to most conceptions of welfare.

Equality in the satisfaction of basic needs is a suitable candidate for such a basic notion of welfare. Although equality can be expressed in many dimensions, it ultimately requires us to focus on inequality in the satisfaction of basic needs. One straightforward reason is that no meaningful life is possible in the absence of the satisfaction of these basic needs, including all the necessary components of human well-being. "A valuable human existence depends, in fact, on certain fundamental necessities. Minimally, it depends on physical and psychological preservation, which in turn depends on minimum levels of food, shelter, security, freedom from pain, and good health".[38] In this sense, food, shelter and healthcare are some examples of fundamental needs. They are clearly not exhaustive, but they constitute a "necessary precondition to a worthwhile human existence".[39]

with full knowledge about her actual preferences and their resistance to change unmarred by cognitive error (Richard Arneson, "Equality and Equal opportunity for Welfare" (*Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 56, 1988, 83−85).

[37] Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 285.

[38] Larry Temkin, *Inequality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 23.

[39] *Ibid.*, Note that the present claim does not support the absolute equal distribution of goods to the satisfaction of basic needs, because this is not

Of course, my approach faces the burden of specifying what needs these are and I do not intend to provide an answer to this here. However, considerations about undeserved inequality in the satisfaction of basic needs, say, health and healthcare (and other necessities) represent one valuable contribution to the "equality of what?' debate, by suggesting that the gap between the sick and the well may be more significant than inequalities in other spheres.[40] This implies that equal opportunity for basic needs satisfaction is the metric of equality which is most important to treat people as equals. This idea can be termed the *main scheme of distributional equality*.

The main scheme of distributional equality is not a claim about sufficiency. The point I am making here is that the inequalities between the needy and the better off are the most critical inequalities and therefore they should be the main focus of egalitarians as well as of policies of egalitarianism. But this does not imply that we must not be moved even by undeserved inequalities among just the well-to-do.

The reach of my claim can be extended to the reduction of inequalities in opportunity for education. Usually, egalitarians consider education as a crucial means for developing one's own talents and having a fair chance to get a good occupation in society. For this reason, if education was one of the crucial dimensions for people's well-being, egalitarians would have significant reasons to also be concerned with undeserved inequalities in opportunities for education.

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necessary for mere existence. For instance, although food is a necessary resource for the subsistence of human beings, egalitarians need only claim that all individuals must have access to at least enough food to guarantee a decent and respectful life.

[40] *Ibid.*, 24.

The main scheme of distributional equality converges with the political meritocracy's challenge to democracy on the grounds of effective government. Although meritocrats do not believe that equality is intrinsically valuable, the main scheme of distributional equality does converge with effective government to some extent. Meritocrats think that one of the major aims of the ruler and all other officials is to serve the ruled.[41] Thus, they are against fundamental inequalities to the extent that they prevent people to live better lives.

The main scheme of distributional equality has significant implications for the egalitarian assessment of political meritocracy. It suggests that, from an egalitarian perspective, considerations of undeserved inequalities in the satisfaction of basic needs trump a concern for an equal distribution of political power. The reason is that although equal political influence may matter for some egalitarian reasons, it is not a necessary precondition for a worthwhile human existence. A special consideration for inequality in basic needs satisfaction entails the value of political equality to the extent that it contributes to the reduction of inequalities in the satisfaction of basic needs.[42]

This implies that, theoretically, from an egalitarian standpoint, most experts or virtuous individuals do not have a *claim* to rule. Even in the presence of perfect equality of access, having better

[41] Joseph Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism: A Political Philosophy for Modern Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 30.

[42] The preceding argument does not imply that we always ought to pursue a drastic undermining of political equality if this could give someone the basic minimum that they lacked. As we have said earlier, while egalitarians claim that equality is an important ideal, many of them believe that equality is not all that matters. Therefore, the resistance to strong increments of political inequality would not be paradoxical if it was motivated by valuable ideals other than equality.

academic qualifications, expertise or moral virtues than others do not necessarily meet the egalitarian main concern principle. Ultimately, egalitarians should be interested in the results that a political selection system in a particular socio-economic context can achieve. Egalitarian justice requires allocating political power among the members of society not according to their individual merits but rather according to how well a political institution performs in relation to the well-being of the people.

Yet, egalitarians can have a *reason* for political meritocracy if this can guarantee better egalitarian outcomes than alternative selection systems. In other words, the egalitarian support for political meritocracy presupposes that such a system can contribute to reduce inequalities better than alternative ones.[43] So, under the principle of *main scheme of distributional equality*, the unequal distribution of political power presupposed by political meritocracy can be justified to the extent that it contributes to maximizing the egalitarian outcomes of the overall political system.

This is a conditional defense of political meritocracy. And as such, it does not ascribe to political meritocracy any intrinsic value. The idea that a political regime is more desirable than others if it can lead to better egalitarian outcomes opens to the possibility that egalitarians ought to accept or reject meritocratic mechanisms depending upon how meritocratic and alternative selection mechanisms perform under some circumstances. This conditional aspect of my argument is the basis of its reasonableness as the idea that one specific selection mechanisms ought to be appropriate in all conditions is unreasonable. The

[43] My distinction between egalitarian 'claims' and 'reasons' is indebted to Shlomi Segall, "Should the Best Qualified be appointed?" (*The Journal of Moral Philosophy*, Vol. 9, Issue 1, 2012), 31−54.

world is populated by varied political communities, which are characterized by, for example, great cultural, economic or geographical differences. This diversity makes it extremely improbable that desired political outcomes can be achieved in various places through the same political system. And presumably, a political system has higher chances to be effective if it takes into consideration the specific conditions of its society. Of course, this does not exclude the fact that all political communities should abide by some general political principles such as individual right to live, freedom from discrimination and equality before the law but it illustrates some of the limits of theories of government.

IV

Conclusion

What are the bases of a meritocratic distributions of power? And are they articulated enough for political meritocracy to be compared with contemporary Western democratic theories? I have suggested that political meritocracy is the expression of a principle of substantive equality of political opportunity and as such, it competes on an equal footing with another interpretation of this principle, namely *democratic equality of fair opportunity*. Political meritocracy is characterized by two main tenets: on the one hand, political meritocracy selects candidates based on the qualities and skills that are relevant to the political positions, and on the other it ought to provide people with equal chances to develop these abilities and expertise. In this, political meritocracy offers a morally coherent position. A concern for equality does not entail unconditional support for political meritocracy. From an egalitarian standpoint, meritocratic selections of future leaders

can be justified to the extent to which they contribute to increase equality of basic needs satisfaction and opportunity for education more than other political procedures. If these suggestions are correct, society has a reason to promote or select future politicians according to their merits, if this provides better outcomes.

National University of Singapore

& King's College London