

# Meritocracy in the Political and Economic Spheres

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## Abstract

The idea that our economic institutions should be designed meritocratically is back as a hot topic in western academic circles. At the same time political meritocracy is once again a subject of philosophical discussion, with some Western philosophers embracing epistocracy and Confucianism being revived among Eastern philosophers. This survey has the ambition, first, of putting differing strands of this literature into dialogue with each other: the economic with the political, and the Western with the Eastern. Second, we seek here to impose order on the debates over meritocracy by carefully separating out the four steps that must be traversed on the journey to a meritocratic conclusion. Third we want to promote a more productive debate moving forward by cleanly pulling apart three kinds of purported merit base.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

With the recent publication of Daniel Markovtis's *The Meritocracy Trap* (2019), Michael Sandel's *The Tyranny of Merit* (2020), and Adrian Woolridge's *The Aristocracy of Talent* (2021), the idea that our economic institutions should be designed meritocratically is back as a hot topic in western academic circles. Meanwhile, works such as Jiang Qing's *A Confucian Constitutional Order* (2012), Daniel Bell's *The China Model* (2016), Jason Brennan's *Against Democracy* (2016), and Tongdong Bai's *Against Political Equality* (2021) have made political meritocracy once again a subject of philosophical discussion, with some Western philosophers embracing epistocracy and a revival of Confucianism among Eastern philosophes.

This survey has the ambition, first, of putting differing strands of this literature into dialog with each other: the economic with the political, and the Western with the Eastern. Our other two ambitions concern order and rigour.

We seek here to impose order on the debates over meritocracy by carefully separating out the four steps that must be traversed on the journey to a meritocratic conclusion.<sup>1</sup> First, the meritocrat must be able to identify a

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plausible merit base; that is, she must tell us in virtue of what one possesses merit relative to the good being distributed. Second, she must show that one's possession (or not) of that base can be verified in practice in a morally acceptable way. (Our focus here is on whether we ought to create/maintain meritocratic economic and political institutions in the actual world.) Third, she must demonstrate that everyone has a fair chance of acquiring that base, and thus the rewards that are to be attached to it. Fourth, and finally, she must argue that the moral importance of rewarding the possession of that base is high enough to outweigh whatever other morally important drawbacks, aside from any potential unfairness uncovered at the third step, come along with doing so.

In this essay we structure our two reviews—of meritocracy in the economic sphere and in the political sphere—as assessments of the problems a meritocrat might confront, and the solutions on offer, as she attempts to traverse those four steps. Some of the problems to be mentioned are theoretical and others practical; we will make it clear each time which is the case.

Regarding rigour, we want to promote a more productive debate moving forward by cleanly pulling apart the differing answers being given at the first hurdle. On our reading of the various literatures surveyed here, there are three kinds of merit base being proposed: qualification, contribution, and effort. The latter two are focused on the individual's past or future actions, whereas the first focuses on some more or less fixed feature or features of the individual. And, among the latter two, one's effort is a function of one's actions *in isolation from their results*, whereas one's contribution is a function of the results of one's actions. Finally, in the literature there are two subtypes of the contribution base: actual contribution and prospective contribution; in what follows we will always clarify which is under discussion.

With the benefit of a clearer understanding of the various varieties of meritocracy and the distinct steps in the arguments for them, it becomes likewise clearer how different objections to meritocracy apply and what their limitations are. The final part of our agenda, then, is to lay out the objections that meritocrats must confront, though always with the goal of setting up further discussion as opposed to establishing an anti-meritocratic conclusion.

## 2 | MERITOCRACY IN THE ECONOMIC SPHERE

We start by asking whether economic privilege should be distributed according to merit. This question is broad and vague, but we can make a start by investigating whether income should be distributed according to merit. Having deemed this question worth examining, we're naturally led to asking whether jobs should be awarded on merit, since for most people their job is the primary source of their income (this is true even among the wealthiest—see Markovits (2019, pp. 88-94)). Finally, working backwards further, we arrive at the question whether higher education admissions should be arranged meritocratically, since higher education credentials are such a strong determinant of elite job distribution (Markovits, 2019, pp. 139-42). In this section we discuss the moral defensibility of meritocracy in all three contexts. And in each context, a separate discussion is needed for each of the three proposed merit bases.

This gives us nine pairings to discuss, and four hurdles for each theory to pass. At each of the first two hurdles some of the nine theories will fall. To keep track of all this we've created the table in Figure 1, which will be updated at the end of §2.1 and 2.2 to show which options for economic meritocracy are still on the table.

	Qualification	Contribution	Effort
Admission	A/Q	A/C	A/E
Jobs	J/Q	J/C	J/E
Income	I/Q	I/C	I/E

FIGURE 1 The Variants of Economic Meritocracy.

Much of the literature we'll cite in the rest of this section is on distribution according to desert, as opposed to distribution according to merit. Although we doubt that either 'merit' or 'desert' can be defined in a way that is both elucidating and neutral among competing theories, we're confident that many of the plausible claims made about desert retain their plausibility when transposed into a discussion of merit.

## 2.1 | What is the merit base for admission, or a job, or an income?

### 2.1.1 | Qualification

The idea that the merit base for admission is something like intelligence, knowledge or aptitude, and that we should award admission based on grades and test scores that indicate the presence of those qualifications, is so fundamental to how most people think about admission that it generally goes unstated. It comes up for philosophical discussion only in the face of challenges from those who would rather admissions be awarded on other bases *in addition* to qualification; this is the position of those who support, e.g., admission by lottery or the use of affirmative action to achieve a more diverse student body (Sher, 1987, pp. 119-28).

Likewise in the case of jobs: the default view is that qualification is the merit base, though in this case the position has actually been argued for (Mason, 2006, pp. 56-64).

By contrast, the idea that qualification is the merit base for income has no intuitive plausibility and has never, to our knowledge, been defended in print.

### 2.1.2 | Contribution

Mulligan endorses (a certain kind of) actual contribution as a merit base for income; David Miller does as well (Mulligan, 2018:ch. 6; Miller, 1999:ch.7). And both Miller and Norman Daniels endorse prospective contribution as a merit base for jobs (Miller, 1999:ch. 8; Daniels, 1998). Of course, it can rarely if ever be known ahead of time how productive a person will be if given a job and/or a certain income. This doesn't, however, diminish the theoretical interest of contribution as a merit base, and contribution certainly has a fair bit of intuitive force as a merit base for jobs and income.

Finally: in the case of admissions the idea of contribution as a merit base is highly unpopular, as are all proposed admissions criteria that aren't a kind of qualification.

### 2.1.3 | Effort

Effort is widely considered to be a non-starter in the context of admission. Likewise, effort has never been under serious discussion as a merit base for jobs. Effort plays a role, of course, in attaining qualifications and in putting oneself in a position to contribute, but employers and admissions officers seek to recruit on those other bases as opposed to effort itself.

Effort is a much more natural fit as a merit base for income, as they're both gradable. Furthermore, there is some intuitive pull to the idea that how hard you work (one possible gloss on 'effort') should determine the income you receive. Drawing on this natural thought, Robert Young (1998, pp. 255-6) argues that effort is the primary, but not sole, merit base for income (and wealth).

One worry about the idea of effort as a merit base for income, however, is that, as Mulligan (2018:128) says, "much of our expenditure of effort is aimed at reducing further efforts". Consequently, rewarding effort with income might create an incentive to make one's future job-related tasks more difficult than they need to be.

	Qualification	Contribution	Effort
Admission	A/Q	A/C	A/E
Jobs	J/Q	J/C	J/E
Income	I/Q	I/C	I/E

FIGURE 2 The Variants of Economic Meritocracy that Fall at the First Hurdle.

See Figure 2 for a summary of the conclusions of this sub-section.

## 2.2 | Can we discover who is meritorious in the economic sphere?

### 2.2.1 | Qualification

Perhaps the most important selling point of qualification theory is its being implementable through standardized testing and credential requirements. Not surprisingly, one of the fiercest contemporary defenders of meritocracy, Adrian Woolridge, is bullish on standardized testing (2021:371-2, 376-83).

But just as obvious as its appeal is its Achilles Heel: reliability. How reliable are the standardized tests and the processes by which we award credentials as ways of picking out those who have the qualifications, such as intelligence, that we're looking for in the contexts of admission and hiring? In the case of standardized tests, there are all sorts of familiar worries: e.g., that the tests are discriminatory, and that taking a test is itself a skill but (obviously) not the skill for which we want evidence. Second, if our standardized tests are unreliable then, *ipso facto*, so is the process by which we award credentials, since most people who gain admission emerge with a credential.<sup>2</sup>

### 2.2.2 | Contribution

In the case of jobs, distribution based on actual contribution is possible for an applicant looking to move within the organisation that already employs her, but not possible for other applicants. For these other cases, however, distribution based on *prospective* contribution is certainly possible. The trouble is that the best way to assess a job applicant's prospective output—which is perhaps not the same as contribution (whatever *that* is—see below) but is closely related on any reckoning—is through standardized testing (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998)! But, of course, standardized tests are supposed to identify qualifications; it is only indirectly, if at all, that they pick out those likely to make a contribution. So any sincere effort to put contribution theory into practice in the domain of jobs is likely to collapse into an effort to put qualification theory into practice. Of course, the distinction between the two kinds of meritocratic principle remains important, especially for those cases in which qualifications constitute a poor predictor of contribution (Walzer, 1983:ch.5; Mulligan, 2018:chs.4-5).

By contrast, the question whether we could instantiate contribution—specifically, actual contribution—as the base for *income* has rightfully received a great deal of scholarly attention. Some have posited that what one earns on the free market in income is proportional to the value of what one has contributed (Miller, 1999, pp. 182-9). If that were true, and if actual contribution were the right merit base, then such markets would instantiate meritocracy in the sense of ensuring that more merit is rewarded with more income.

Of course, given that we are probing whether any theory of meritocracy is practicable, the difference between making this claim about the actual market in income and making it about an idealised free market is crucial. It is generally agreed that all existing markets are riddled with opportunities to increase one's income without increasing one's contribution—for instance, by lobbying the government to change the laws in ways that entrench advantage for

existing firms. There is a great deal of pessimism about the possibility of creating a market without those imperfections, though Mulligan has recently argued that doing so is a realistic possibility (2018:esp. ch.8).

In any event, it's one thing to determine a way to instantiate contribution as the merit base for income, quite another to determine how to do this in a morally acceptable way. At least these two moral issues will arise:

- We'll have to decide whether contributing one's capital to a productive enterprise is to count as a 'contribution' in the relevant sense. On the side of saying that it does, there are the facts that investment decisions are often the result of the skilled exercise of judgement and that any investment carries an opportunity cost. On the other hand, given that we're committed to treating labour as a contribution we have to worry about whether investment is a contribution in the same sense. We might wind up deciding that investment has to be treated as a lesser contribution or not a contribution at all, which would be fine in theory but a problem when we concern ourselves (as we are now) with whether we can discover in practice who is meritorious. Our challenge will be to somehow take that portion of the final product that is attributable to capital (or some portion of that portion) and figure out a principled way to divide the associated merit among the other contributors.<sup>3</sup>
- Since the goal is to have more merit correspond with more income, we'll need a criterion for setting an ordinal ranking of contributions. Here we face a choice: The easy way out is to say that one contribution is more meritorious than another just in case the market value of its marginal product is greater. However, the marginal product of a contribution—a factor of production, in economics jargon—doesn't tell us what value was produced by that contribution *on its own* (Sen, 1985, p. 16); furthermore, given how marginal product is calculated, the marginal product of one individual's contribution is affected by whether there are other people out there who could contribute something to the same enterprise. Supposing, however, that we can attribute a proportion of the total product to each meritorious contribution we still face a problem: market value seems a poor measure of merit or any other moral value. The market rewards the satisfaction of desires, but the satisfaction of desires per se is arguably morally neutral (Knight, 1922; Sandel, 2020, pp. 137-40).<sup>4</sup> Shunning the easy way out means assigning oneself the task of identifying some other currency by which to assess some contributions as more meritorious than others. The trouble is, when it comes to contributions that merit an income, it seems the only thing they have in common is the very fact that they have a market value (i.e., that one can get paid to make them) (Hurka, 2003, pp. 65-6).

### 2.2.3 | Effort

Jonathan Wolff (2003) has argued persuasively that it is not practicable to reward effort with income. The basic problem is that free markets are set up to reward output as opposed to the effort put into generating output. And there are no extant proposals, of which we're aware, for using non-market mechanisms to apportion income to effort. How would this work? Some socialist models proposed paying every labourer a flat hourly wage, and we grant that there is intuitive pull to the idea that each hour given up is equally valuable no matter which person gives it up and therefore should be compensated equally. But this wouldn't proportion income to effort very precisely: I might spend that hour going through the motions of work halfheartedly, while you spend the hour working diligently.

See Figure 3 for a summary of the conclusions of this sub-section.

	Qualification	Contribution	Effort
Admission	A/Q	A/C	A/E
Jobs	J/Q	J/C	J/E
Income	I/Q	I/C	I/E

FIGURE 3 The Variants of Economic Meritocracy that Fall at the Second Hurdle.

## 2.3 | Which theories of merit offer people a fair chance to become meritorious in the economic sphere?

### 2.3.1 | Qualification

Both remaining versions of qualification theory will be confronted with a serious practical problem if we don't have a fair chance to become meritorious of admission, since the admissions process is a gateway through which one must pass in order to obtain credentials, and to a great extent it would be through imposing credential requirements on applicants that we would implement qualification theory in the domain of jobs.

So, do we? There is something close to a consensus among philosophers that to give every young adult a fair chance for admission and a good job we need to achieve *fair equality of opportunity*, which is a condition under which college/university places and good jobs are open to everyone, the screening process for them is non-discriminatory, and the competition for them is unaffected by the circumstances of our birth and childhood (Rawls, 1999:ch.II). Not surprisingly, then, those who support, or are at least resigned to, meritocracy tend to endorse fair equality of opportunity (e.g., Mulligan, 2018; Sachs, 2016).

It would then be devastating for qualification theory if inequality of opportunity were baked into the fabric of society (Clayton, 2012, p. 421). And that, precisely, is meritocracy's downfall, according to Caroline Criado Perez and Daniel Markovits. Perez explores the myriad ways in which our schools and universities fail to nurture talents and ambitions for females as well as they do for males (Perez, 2019:ch.4), while Markovits explains in painstaking detail all the ways in which wealthy parents bestow advantages on their children in the competition for admission, from creating an intellectually nurturing home environment to paying for elite standardized test preparation classes and private tutoring (2019:ch.5). In response, Mulligan argues that the inequality we observe can be got rid of (2018:77-82). He tentatively proposes, for instance, that the state provide preschooling as a public good and that it ban some of the most disadvantageous child rearing practices, such as religious education, homeschooling, and refusing to vaccinate one's children.

Another oft-noted problem is that the process by which it is determined which qualifications are needed for which positions might be suffused with bias (Arneson, 2013, pp. 105-6). For instance, job requirements are often drawn up, even if only implicitly, with male applicants in mind (Mackinnon, 1987:ch.2; Perez, 2019:ch.4).

### 2.3.2 | Contribution

Contribution theory, likewise, faces a serious practical problem if we don't have a fair chance to make an actual contribution, and thus a fair chance to become meritorious of income given contribution theory. So, do we? For reasons given in §2.2, this reduces to the question whether we have a fair chance to make a contribution *through our labour*. Sceptics will say that how productive any instance of labouring is depends on the availability of capital on which to labour, which is not in the control of the labourer, and that consequently there is a pervasive inequality of opportunity to be productive.

The contribution theorist has, at this point, two options. One is to propose policies for reallocating access to capital in a more egalitarian way. She might propose, for instance, that the state should "level up" (to use the language of the U.K. Government) less prosperous areas of the country by relocating government offices, improving transport links, offering incentives for businesses to base themselves in such areas, etc. The other option is to say that it's not one's productivity that determines one's contribution. The natural thing to look for would be something more under the control of the labourer. But once the contribution theorist starts down this road it's going to be very difficult for her to find a principled place to stop short of effort, since the one thing, if anything, over which labourers have total control is their own effort. Consequently, by taking this fork the contribution theorist in the context of income is at risk of becoming an effort theorist.

## 2.4 | Does the moral case for rewarding merit in the economic sphere outweigh the moral costs?

### 2.4.1 | Qualification

Critics of meritocracy in the context of admission and jobs have generally focused their attention on the qualification theory version of it, and for many of them the central problem with instituting meritocracy is that it means sacrificing a more important moral ideal. For simplicity, we can call this ideal 'social solidarity' (though admittedly this is to paper over important differences in how the critics cash out this ideal). The concern here is that meritocratic systems of awarding social goods put an official stamp on what divides us, namely our differing qualifications, and in so doing provide moral cover for the social stratification that follows from it. This leads to hubris among those who land at the top of the divide and resentment among those who land at the bottom (Sandel, 2020:ch.4; Appiah, 2018).<sup>5</sup>

Two further oft-noted problems with attaching admissions and jobs to qualifications are (1) how it distorts the systems by which credentials are awarded (Sandel, 2020, pp. 7-13, Caplan, 2018) and (2) its apparent incompatibility with affirmative action (Clayton, 2012; Segall, 2012).

### 2.4.2 | Contribution

The debate over the moral importance of rewarding merit with income will take a very different shape if the version of meritocracy under consideration is the contribution version. As explained in §2.3, it is very difficult to argue that everyone has a fair chance to contribute. Consequently, meritocrats of this stripe are very unlikely to argue that it is of non-instrumental moral importance to reward merit proportionally with income. Rather, assuming that their measure of contribution is output as valued on the free market, they will argue that rewarding merit with income is of instrumental value: a way of achieving economic productivity and all that goes with it (Woolridge, 2021:esp. 367-70).

The first question to ask about such a defence of contribution theory is whether its prioritisation of economic growth is defensible. There are some long standing worries about economic growth as an endpoint, three of which can be quickly rehearsed here: First, when natural disasters strike and thus stimulate the need for rebuilding, this is recorded as economic growth; second, some economic activity that contributes to growth causes damaging externalities; and third, economic growth drives global warming.<sup>6</sup>

Setting aside the worry that economic productivity isn't all it's cracked up to be, the anti-meritocrat will say that the instrumental argument for contribution-meritocracy has two weaknesses. First, any instrumental case for meritocracy is a candidate for being morally trumped; we would be morally required to forgo the goods of further economic productivity if in doing so we had to sacrifice some foundational value. Second, the most effective route to economic productivity might not involve much by way of rewarding contribution. For instance, some argue that universal provision of an unconditional basic income would unleash people's productive capacities even if it substantially decouples income from contribution (Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017, pp. 23-27).

By way of bringing §2 to a close, we'll summarize the prospects, as we now see them, for a defence of meritocracy in the economic sphere. For admissions, the main merit basis in contention is qualifications. However, there are serious moral concerns about the use of qualifications as the basis for admissions, most notably absence of fair equality of opportunity in the pursuit of the prized qualifications. Likewise for jobs, the only plausible merit basis is qualifications, though again the problem of inequality of opportunity looms, as do worries about social solidarity. Finally, the remaining merit basis in contention in the case of income is contribution. Here the meritocrat is likely to concede that there is no intrinsic moral value to be achieved by aligning income with contribution while insisting that the instrumental case for doing so is strong because of the resulting gain in economic productivity; meanwhile a sceptic is likely to question the moral importance of maximizing productivity.

### 3 | MERITOCRACY IN THE POLITICAL SPHERE

We turn now to the idea of meritocracy in the sphere of politics. Should political power be distributed according to merit?

Much political power is attached to privileged jobs in the government and civil service. Questions about the merit base for this sort of power reduce to questions about the merit base for jobs discussed above.

More controversially, some seek to challenge the system of representative democracy—based on the principle of one person, one vote—on meritocratic grounds. Voters in a liberal democracy have significant political power, collectively though not individually, and citizens are automatically qualified to vote once they reach a certain age, except where voting rights are withdrawn for special reasons (e.g., where convicted criminals are disenfranchised).

Meritocracy and democracy are compatible if the electorate can be trusted to select candidates for their merits. In practice, this condition might not often hold, but in theory it could, given the right cultural environment (Kim, 2018). We might be sceptical about this possibility, however, and in the face of such scepticism some political meritocrats have considered ways of using non-democratic institutions to make politics more reliably meritocratic. These can involve restricting democracy – giving special voting privileges to meritorious elites (Brennan, 2016) – or simply circumventing it – empowering certain elites to appoint lawmakers and executives directly (Bell, 2006:ch.7, 2016, 2020:ch.2, Qing, 2012; Woolridge, 2021:ch.17, Bai, 2021).

#### 3.1 | What is the merit base for political power?

It is important to recognise that political meritocrats, as far as we know, all argue in terms of the greater good. For some economic meritocrats (e.g. Mulligan), according privilege to the meritorious is justified in terms of the good it does to the meritorious alone, by giving them what they deserve. But in the political case the justification is always grounded on benefit to the broader public, who reap the benefits of good governance that, it is argued, will follow from a meritocratic system.

##### 3.1.1 | Effort

Most literature on meritocracy focuses on qualification or contribution. Effort may play a role in cultivating the qualities that constitute qualifications or in realising political contributions. But since political meritocrats argue in terms of the greater good, what matters are the fruits of the effort rather than the effort itself. Those who try hardest to gain or wield power might turn out to be the worst at governing. For instance, they might make bad decisions distorted by pride and excessive ambition, as Adam Smith suggested (Smith, 2012:bk.4, ch.2). We therefore won't discuss effort in relation to political meritocracy.

##### 3.1.2 | Contribution

Like merit in the economic sphere, political merit can be based on contribution – in this case, contribution towards the functions or goals of the political system. A meritocratic system could reserve political offices or special voting privileges to those who make the most valuable political contribution or are reasonably expected to do so. This raises the question of what counts as a political contribution, discussed in the next section.

##### 3.1.3 | Qualification

Alternatively, political merit can be based on qualification. Political meritocrats often aim at distributing power according to personal qualities such as wisdom and benevolence. Qualification-based meritocracy and contribution-based



meritocracy are linked in practice: the same tests that screen for qualifications can be used as a measure of prospective contribution. Many meritocratic proposals in fact involve a combination of contribution- and qualification-based selection, without requiring these to be separated in practice (Bell, 2016: ch.2). Nevertheless, we can consider them as distinct forms of meritocracy in theory.

## 3.2 | Which theories of merit offer hope of being implementable in the political sphere?

### 3.2.1 | Contribution

One big problem for contribution-based political meritocracy is defining the right sort of political contribution. Some politically powerful members of modern society, e.g. judges and central bankers, could be said to be chosen on the basis of their exceptional contributions in specific fields, e.g., law or banking. But what does it mean to say that somebody has made, or is likely to make, a significant contribution to *politics*? Simply being politically active can't count on its own, since certain political activities—starting a party based on ethnic hatred, e.g.—should hardly be called contributions.

Some political meritocrats suggest that certain jobs are similar enough to political office that those working in them can be selected to hold political power on the basis of their contribution in their field. This contribution—again it may be actual or prospective—can be assessed through a peer-recommendation system (Bell, 2016, pp. 103–7, Chan, 2013, pp. 45–49). Likewise, those who do well in minor political offices can be promoted to more major ones in a manner similar to that by which companies promote employees. Alternatively, political offices could be offered to those who have their contributions recognised in official decorations, e.g., medals for bravery or exceptional service, awards for business leadership, etc. Arguably, something like this is practiced in Singapore (Wooldridge, 2021:ch.17, Yew, 2000:chs.10-12).

One problem is that opinions differ widely on what the goals and functions of the political system are, and therefore what counts as contributing to them. A socialist, believing that a key purpose of the state is to aim at economic equality, might argue that business leaders work against that purpose: their political contribution is *negative*. Analogously, a conservative, believing that one purpose of the state is to protect private enterprise and the free market, might argue that the contribution of union organisers is negative. Others, however, will regard successful business leaders or union organisers as having made precisely the right sort of contribution to merit political office. One's views about whether any proposed system adequately implements contribution-based meritocracy will depend on one's beliefs about what counts as a political contribution.

### 3.2.2 | Qualification

Qualification-based political meritocracy is popular in East Asia, influenced by the legacy of the examination system dating back as far as to the Han dynasty (Bai, 2021, pp. 73–74, Bell, 2016, pp. 81–89, Wooldridge, 2021:ch.5). Modern-day meritocrats propose that competitive examinations can be used to select leaders with desirable personal qualities (Bai, 2021, pp. 73–79, Bell, 2016, p. 89, Qing, 2012, pp. 59–60). Alternatively, examination-based meritocracy can be combined with democracy: voters could be selected or given greater weighting on the base of exam scores (Brennan, 2016, pp. 211–14).

The recommendation system mentioned above could also be used to select for qualification: members of select organisations and industries could be tasked with assessing which of their colleagues were best qualified for political office.

Qualificationist political meritocracy is thus implementable through an examination or recommendation system. But there is considerable room for debate over what the relevant qualifications are (Estlund, 2009, p. 262). Just as we found with the definition of political contribution, the definition of political qualification must depend a great deal on what the goals and functions of government are, on which there is no consensus. A supporter of the “entrepreneurial

state” will regard an interest in policy innovation as a key qualification for political leaders; a believer in the “minimal state” might prefer caution and restraint.

Given the uncertainty around this, a reasonable strategy might be to subject the selection of relevant qualifications—or, in a contribution-based system, the designation of relevant contributions—to democratic decision. A problem would then be to ensure that the vote reflected genuine beliefs about merit rather than strategic voter interests. Perhaps this could be achieved by the right voting system (Brennan & Landemore, 2021, pp. 102–10, Bitton, 2022).

### 3.3 | Which theories of merit offer people a fair chance to become meritorious in the political sphere?

#### 3.3.1 | Contribution

To give everyone a fair chance of becoming meritorious through political contribution, there must be broad opportunities to be assessed for contribution. In the recommendation system, this would require belonging to the businesses or professional bodies that supply candidate political officials. Everyone will need an equal chance of getting a place in one of these organisations. This then reduces to the question of equal opportunities for jobs, with all the difficulties discussed in the previous section.

Moreover, even if everyone has an equal opportunity to make the relevant contributions, this doesn't in itself guarantee an equal opportunity to be chosen for political office. In the recommendation system, colleagues might fail to recognise worthwhile contributions because of explicit or implicit bias against certain irrelevant characteristics.

A recommendation system that provided genuinely equal opportunity, both to contribute and to have contribution *recognized*, would have to include reliable measures for guaranteeing equal access to the right sort of job and somehow control for the effects of unfair discrimination.

#### 3.3.2 | Qualification

In theory, qualification-based meritocracy, based on public examinations, could give a fair chance to everyone (Bai, 2021, pp. 74–75). But inequalities in educational opportunity are relevant here as well. (Elman provides some historical analysis of social inequalities in the traditional examination system of ancient China (Elman, 2013).) As with any sort of educational achievement, there is reason to think that those who fail often fail on account of things they could not control.

### 3.4 | Does the moral case for rewarding merit in the political sphere outweigh the moral costs?

In principle it can appear desirable to restrict political power to those with special qualifications, or those who will make the greatest contributions. We might think it will benefit everyone if such meritocrats have power: voters or officials who possess exceptional merits will provide exceptional government. The crudest version of this thinking is found in Thomas Carlyle: “Find in any country the Ablest Man that exists there; raise him to the supreme place, and loyally reverence him: you have a perfect government for that country” (Carlyle, 1841, p. 317). But even if we could identify and reward the relevant sort of merit, all forms of meritocracy involve sacrificing other moral ideals, raising the question of whether the trade-off is worthwhile.

#### 3.4.1 | Contribution

Even if we could agree on what should count as a political contribution, there is always uncertainty about whether contributions in those recognised ways correlate with good governance. Political meritocrats argue that the

correlation is at least stronger with contribution than with electoral success (Bell, 2016: ch.1, Bai, 2021: ch.3). This does not mean that the problem should not count against meritocracy, however, considering that there are alternatives to both it and electoral democracy, for instance the open democracy model based on mini-publics rather than elections (Dahl, 1970; Fishkin, 2009; Landemore, 2020). An interesting proposal from Bitton (2022) is to combine features of open democracy with meritocracy.

Another problem is that the uncertainty of politics makes it difficult to know precisely what sort of contribution will be most valuable for solving the problems of tomorrow (Brennan & Landemore, 2021, pp. 180–95, Tong, 2022). Contribution-based meritocracy could therefore have the result of promoting those who were successful in solving yesterday's problems rather than those who have a special capacity for solving tomorrow's. Qualification-based meritocracy might have the advantage here, by selecting for general characteristics that could lead to good governance in a wide range of situations.

As we have mentioned, meritocracy in general involves a sacrifice of social solidarity. Those who govern are at risk of becoming hubristic if they are granted office based on having been recommended by official committees (Brennan & Landemore, 2021, pp. 197–98, Tong, 2018). Those excluded are at risk of becoming resentful or despondent about having been judged politically inept (Sandel, 2020:ch.1). This could perhaps be avoided if meritocrats are promoted by randomly chosen "mini-publics" (Bitton, 2022). Political meritocrats point out that electoral democracy also "can exacerbate rather than alleviate social conflict" in ways that meritocracy can avoid (Bell, 2016, p. 54). But again this counts in meritocracy's favour only if there is no superior third alternative – perhaps, for example, the open democracy model – that is capable of avoiding such dynamics: we do not take a position on that question here.

Finally, insisting on contribution as a merit-base for political power involves a potential conflict with democracy. In a democracy, people choose their own government. The more external restrictions placed upon their choice, the more democracy is compromised. Of course this raises the question of whether democracy is valuable in itself, to which we return below.

### 3.4.2 | Qualification

Qualification-based political meritocracy also involves the potential sacrifice of several moral ideals.

First, there is equality. The distribution of qualifications depends on the distribution of natural talents, early opportunities, and other unequally-distributed features. Even if we believe that only equality of opportunity matters morally, a sacrifice will have to be made here, since, as mentioned above, there are limitations on how much equality of opportunity we can reasonably expect to maintain. The relevant question, however, is how meritocracy compares to alternatives on this measure. Electoral democracy restricts the opportunity to hold high political office to those capable of running successful election campaigns but at least grants all citizens equal opportunity to influence political outcomes through voting. Open democracy, which selects citizen councils through a lottery system, guarantees equality of opportunity at least in a crude probabilistic sense.

Second, there is again a possible sacrifice of social solidarity, this time with hubris and resentment arising with respect to possession of qualifications (Sandel, 2020:ch.4). It could also undermine feelings of cooperation and community by creating a culture in which individuals directly compete for political influence. Again, it must be noted that electoral democracy has also been accused of tending towards a divisive and competitive political culture, which can undermine social solidarity in various ways (Hussain, 2020; Landemore, 2018).

Third, there is a possible compromise of liberal neutrality or value-pluralism. In complex and diverse societies, different individuals and groups have different conceptions of what is most valuable in life and politics. The choice of qualifications for political power could encode certain of those conceptions at the expense of others. For example, the various Confucian systems that have recently been proposed implicitly assume that specific Confucian virtues are politically desirable qualities: these are what examinations and peer-assessment are meant to test for. Chan, in response to Qing, argues against taking Confucianism, understood as a comprehensive doctrine, as the

base for political meritocracy, since this threatens to marginalise minority cultures in China and elsewhere (see his response in Qing, 2012, pp. 102–7). Others argue that Confucian values are inherently in tension with democracy (Li, 1999, pp. 172–80) or with socialist ideals (see Wang Shaoguang's response in Qing, 2012, pp. 148–58), both of which are highly valued by many groups.

Fourth, qualification-based meritocracy can lead to corruption, as mentioned above.

Finally, qualification-based political meritocracy could be undemocratic insofar as it elevates the most meritorious rulers even when these aren't preferred by the ruled. Supporters of qualification-based meritocracy reply explicitly to this. Democracy, they argue, is valuable only if voters can be trusted to make good political decisions. Unfortunately, some evidence suggests that voters regularly fail even to know what they are deciding, let alone to decide on the basis of any identifiable principles (Brennan, 2016; Caplan, 2008). Even when they make more principled decisions, they are prone to collective myopia and selfishness, giving little weight to the interests of future generations and non-citizens (Bell, 2016, pp. 46–54, Qing, 2012, pp. 58, 72, 93). Open democracy has not been spared criticism by meritocrats on these grounds (Bai, 2021, pp. 91–3). Despite these discouraging findings, however, we might feel that democracy has value beyond its ability to generate good governance and sound political decisions. It might, for instance, be the only form of government capable of remaining *legitimate* in the eyes of the governed in the long-term, as some have argued (Ci, 2019: ch.3), although, again, democracy can suffer its own crises of legitimacy via concerns about the tyranny of the majority and populism (de Tocqueville, 2004: pt.2, ch.3, Hussain, 2020). But, in any case, if democracy has some value beyond good governance, even a meritocracy that delivers what it promises requires this value to be sacrificed.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

We maintain that for each of the two spheres, economic and political, we can learn something about the prospects for meritocracy in that sphere by focusing on what we know about its prospects in the other sphere. Three examples:

1. Discussions of meritocracy in the political sphere have an obvious stalking horse: democracy. In other words, anti-meritocrats can offer a clear alternative to meritocracy. But what are the alternatives to meritocracy in the economic sphere? There are all sorts of practical problems inherent in the idea of economic democracy—i.e., the idea of giving the body politic the final say over the allocation of admission, jobs, and income. This raises the question whether meritocracy in the economic sphere is on stronger ground than we would otherwise have thought, simply from a lack of alternatives.<sup>7</sup>
2. In the economic sphere, specifically in the domains of jobs and income, there are at least two plausible understandings of contribution: we can contribute to the success of the organisation awarding the job or the income, or we can contribute to the productivity of the economy. But what, exactly, does it mean to contribute as a political officeholder? Earlier we noted the perpetual uncertainty as to what will be on the political agenda in the future and the consequent difficulty in assessing which candidate officeholders are well positioned to contribute. But there is a further concern. Part of the reason that this sort of forecasting is so fraught is that people's interests change—a serious problem given that the whole point of government is to do what the people see as in their interest.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, officeholders are leaders, and leadership involves bringing one's people around to a new perspective on their interests. These two points put pressure on the distinction between an officeholder failing to contribute to achieving the government's goals and her changing what the government's goals are.
3. Our third example is another case of clarity in one sphere highlighting unclarity in another. There are no meritocrats arguing that effort is the appropriate merit base in the political domain. The reason stems from what we observed above: supporters of political meritocracy argue in terms of what is beneficial to everyone—good governance—not what is deserved by the meritorious. Mere effort from a political officeholder is of no use to the people she serves, even if we think that willingness to work hard makes her at some level *deserving* of office. It's possible that a similar, heretofore unnoticed, logic might apply in the economic domain. Economies, like governments, are

institutional artefacts; it is for the express purpose of enabling economic activity that we put in place property and contract law, a managed currency, safety and quality standards, etc. The same is true, obviously, of colleges and universities: they exist for some educational purpose. Arguably, these economic and educational goals are not advanced by the mere putting forth of effort. That being the case, proposing that one could merit the rewards those institutions distribute merely in virtue of putting forth effort would run contrary to their central purpose. Furthermore, supposing the validity of this parallel between the arguments in the political and economic domains, we may want to question qualification as a merit base. Again, it may seem that the purposes served by governments, economies and educational institutions are not promoted merely in virtue of being dominated by people who have qualifications,<sup>9</sup> but rather by those people making contributions.

Supposing we decided that neither qualifications nor effort constitutes a valid merit base, where would this leave us? In the political domain it would leave meritocrats with the tricky task of *first* defending a particular theory of the overall aim of government and *then* showing how granting political power to those who make the right sort of contribution will bring about that aim, without imposing unacceptable moral costs. In the economic domain, by contrast, the success of the capitalist system in boosting productivity can be used as a justification for rewarding larger economic contributions with higher income and privileged jobs, as noted in §2.4. The case for awarding university admission on the basis of contribution, however, is less clear.

By way of closing, we want to emphasise that meritocracy need not be construed as an all-things-considered criterion of distributive ethics, nor of the ethics of selecting political officeholders; it can instead be put forward in either case as one pro tanto consideration among others. The strengths and weaknesses of its various strands, detailed above, apply in either case.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This is not to put the burden of proof on the meritocrats; if one wants to establish that economic goods and political office should be distributed on some basis other than merit then one surely must traverse multiple argumentative steps as well.
- <sup>2</sup> For the U.S., see <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=40> (last accessed 20 October 2023); for England, see <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/student-outcomes-data-dashboard/data-dashboard/> (last accessed 20 October 2023).
- <sup>3</sup> See Mulligan (2018, pp. 132-3) for discussion.
- <sup>4</sup> For (we think confusing) responses see Mulligan (2018:§6.7) and Miller (1999, pp. 182-9).
- <sup>5</sup> For a response to this concern, see Mulligan (2018, pp. 151-2) and Woolridge (2021, pp. 395-6). See Sachs-Cobbe, 2023 for discussion.
- <sup>6</sup> For these and other worries see Hamilton, 2003; Schmelzer et al., 2022.
- <sup>7</sup> For a discussion, see Sachs-Cobbe, 2023.
- <sup>8</sup> This might be to overstate the point. We don't mean to rule out the possibility that there are certain restrictions on government that override the people's interests, whether those restrictions are in the form of a constitution, human rights, or something else.
- <sup>9</sup> Of course, if we set up our academic and economic systems in a way that raises legitimate expectations that they will reward the possession of qualifications it may be that qualification thereby becomes a base for entitlements in those domains. But that wouldn't make qualifications a base for *merit* in the morally interesting sense, where X's being a merit

base for Y entails our having a reason to set up institutions that award Y on the base of X. Qualification would be a merit base at most in an attenuated sense, if we allow that institutions themselves can define what counts as merit in their sphere (Here we make use of Miller's (1999:138-43). distinction between conceptions of desert, repurposing that distinction for the case of merit; see also Sher (1987:ch. 7)).

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