

# Meritocracy in America

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American Democracy in Theory and Practice

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The 1952 United States presidential election featured the race between Dwight Eisenhower, the representative for the Republican Party and eventual victor, and Adlai Stevenson II, the representative for the Democratic Party. The following exchange allegedly occurred during the campaign: As Stevenson left the podium following one of his speeches, he was approached by a woman who claimed that “every thinking person in America” would vote for him. Stevenson, a lawyer by trade and a Princeton graduate, allegedly retorted, “I’m afraid that won’t do—I need a majority.” Needless to say, Stevenson was delivered a resounding defeat later that year to the tune of 89 to 442 in the Electoral College vote.

Regardless of whether or not this exchange between Stevenson (who might I add is arguably the most professorial presidential candidate in the history of presidential candidates) and the woman actually happened, that this story so ubiquitously circulated amongst political circles adds to the growing evidence of a divide between the educated and the decidedly *uneducated* in contemporary political thought. Modern political thinking has involved the development of broad commitments to democratic values and democratic rule. At the same time, modern political thinking has been marked, if not defined by, it’s repeated turns to cultural, imperial, scientific, technological, and even academic elitism. Remnants of the lack of faith in the general public have transformed into the intellectual

elitism that pervades modern political thought. The disjunction between the democracy that we theoretically believe in and the elitism that we inevitably revert to is problematic. This apparent contradiction is demonstrated by the commitments to democratic but sudden, subsequent turns to elitism as perpetrated by political theorists. Progressive political ideas are often predicated on the concept of egalitarianism, yet the political vernacular, as demonstrated by Adlai Stevenson II, is quick to discredit the less educated and slow to remember the immortal declaration that “all men are created equal.” A closer analysis of contemporary thoughts on democracy demonstrates that the contradiction only exists on the superficial surface, and democratic governance in its fundamental iteration has remained largely consistent within contemporary political texts. In truth, democracy is the label that modern political thought places on meritocracy. Regardless of whether or not an egalitarian democracy can truly exist in a society such as the United States, this much is true: we need to stop pretending that *the American Dream* is an attainable ideal in the current state of our union. We must realize that modern political theory, which determines public policy and subsequently shapes the experiences of individuals nationwide, operates under an elitist meritocracy rather than an egalitarian democracy. Only when we move beyond the veneer of egalitarianism and accept the fact that political thought is largely elitist can we actually put forth progressive, effective policies.

From its very definition, democracy is government by consent. The mandate of the masses constitutes the government because the power to govern vests in the people’s voluntary agreement to enter the political system. Lockean perspectives on power dynamics within a political system suggests that people are naturally free from any authority or superior power, and are only subject to the will or legislative authority of a

political system out of their own volition. Without the consent of the people, civil society could not be formed. Subsequent theories on democracy exploit this freedom from mandatory participation by leveraging it into an assertion that the decisions of the state should result from extensive, informed, and inclusive discussion and debate. By extending general participation in the formation of public policy, the supporters of this form of democracy aim to increase the citizen's awareness of her moral and social responsibilities, reduce the threat of tyranny, and improve the quality of the government. This theory posits that public officials, who simply carry out the decisions determined by the majority vote in popular assemblies, hold little to no power beyond acting as agents of the public at large.

From this mandate-centered definition of democracy follows the presumption that all men are equal. Early political thought postulates that prior to governance, there existed a perfect state of equality with all the power being reciprocal and no one having more than the other. In *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes claims that nature endowed humans with equality of ability—no one is born with a significant physical or mental advantage over her peers. Hobbes posits a natural condition for humans known as the “state of nature”, wherein there are no laws, rules or government. In his *Second Treatise on Civil Government*, John Locke also proposes this “state of nature”, wherein all men are inherently equal prior to the foundation of society. This presumption is foundational to American society. *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.* We emphasize that any individual, whatever her social standing, whatever her economic worth, whatever the color of her skin, should be treated the same in the political system. We emphasize that any individual has the right to vote and that all votes should be counted equally. From the equality of people stated above flows the democratic principle of universal participation: no man shall

be excluded from the political process, everyone in society should have the opportunity to cast her vote that shall carry equal weight as all the others.

And yet, so much of what America demonstrates—from the War on Drugs to the campaigns against Affirmative Action—sends the message that we do not believe that everyone’s vote matters. That the concept of unequivocal egalitarianism is so foundational to American democracy is what makes the apparent elitism within modern political texts so perplexing. The United States’ iteration of democracy explicitly contradicts the concept of equality amongst people; it is inarguable that the majority of political power is held by a relatively small and influential group of people, wherein the interests and values of those people are essentially homogeneous. Most of the leaders in nearly every sector of American society hail from the same privileged social group, and that members from this group are the most deserving and most likely to be successful at the job. Modern political thought subscribes to the Nietzschean belief that the best political system is an aristocratic one because it furthers the enhancement of the human race. It aims to further higher culture, which is crucial in affirming the existence of those who are educated enough to understand it. It believes that the foundational connections that tie the members of this “social elite” together perpetuate the coordination between the leaders in commerce, government and mass media. It is a system that claims egalitarianism but is in fact quite the opposite.

The problems with elitism need not be said. It is a counterintuitive component of a democratic society because the “power elite” can essentially dictate government policy by virtue of their control over economic resources of the nation. Their power to determine the direction of the nation is fundamentally based on their personal wealth and corporate control, and does not depend on a mandate of the public, as they do not need the ability to

garner mass support. Their decisions are not representative of the interests and values of broader social groups that represent a larger percentage of the population but a relatively smaller percentage of the aggregate national income. Even absent of moral objections, elitism is anathema to democracy. Nevertheless, modern political thought believes that elitism is a fundamental aspect of a political society. In *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill theorizes that political power is primarily a product of non-political social relations, and regards the economic system of a society and its concomitant social relations as being the most important factor determining political influence. The Millsian perspective argues that we need elitism to foster heterogeneity within our political spheres because education, organization, the influence of exceptional individuals, and the possession of institutionalized political authority are ultimately less important than sheer economic prestige under the framework of our political system.

At the heart of elitism is the presumption of the inadequacy of the average citizen. Modern political theorists such as Thomas Hobbes demonstrate their lack of faith in the masses by postulating the actions of the public at large in the absence of a limiting political system. Hobbes' description of the state of nature demonstrates the true nature of Hobbes' opinion on the legitimacy of a completely egalitarian system. He argues that in this natural state, every person is of equal value, and may do anything necessary to protect their interests. Consequently, everyone in this state would act out of self-interest, and thus would be motivated by short-term fulfillment rather than long-term goals. Hobbes claims that "from this equality of ability arise the quality of hope in the attaining of our ends," leading to a competition for the resources that will be the means to those ends. Hobbes argues that the state of nature is actually a state of war—the citizens at large cannot be

trusted to govern themselves, and thus a truly egalitarian, democratic system is unsustainable. Nietzsche would agree with Hobbes that giving people full responsibility for themselves would be catastrophic, as he demonstrates the general lack of faith in the typical citizen by describing the inevitable, inherent violence within the “state of nature” in the *Genealogy*. As a consequence, democratic systems must rely not on the flawed population at large, but on their presumably intelligent, wise and infallible political leaders, and thought that seems highly counterintuitive.

What do we make of this paradox? As the turn to elitism in contemporary political texts demonstrates, democracy in its idealized form has never existed, or has only existed for brief, unsustainable moments in time. The apparent contradiction indicates that the criticism wrought on by political theorists is focused primarily on the descriptive elements of democracy—on its fundamental notions of citizenship, representation and decision-making. Thinkers such as Mill and Nietzsche attack the concept of an operational, informed, democratic citizenry, essentially dismissing it as impossibility. But these fundamental notions have only ever existed in theory, and any respected political thinker would posit that these aspects of classical democracy have never come to fruition. In empirical truth, public policy is far from the expression of the common, public good as developed by the citizenry after widespread discourse and discussion. This description of the development of public policy is dangerously naïve because it neglects the role of demagogic leadership, mass media, and the influence the 1%. In short, classical democratic theory is held to be unrealistic, primarily because it is founded on naïve, utopian conceptions of the nature of man and the operation of society. Any individual who claims that the United States is a

democracy or who appeals to purely democratic ideals when handling public policy is either misinformed or disingenuous.

What we have in the United States is a meritocracy, a system of social organization where selections are made on the basis of ability rather than wealth, family connections or class. Millsian political thought champions a democratic society governed by the “One or the Few” in the form of weighted voting system, wherein the more educated of the population be given a larger stake in the decision-making. In the third chapter of *On Liberty* wherein Mill addresses individuality, he claims that “when the opinions of masses of merely average men are everywhere become or becoming the dominant power”, a corrective is needed in “the more and more pronounced individuality of those who stand on the higher eminences of thought.” Needless to say, this political system is an inadequate resolution to our problem of democracy.

A meritocratic system that maintains elements of egalitarianism would assert that the system constitute a flexible hierarchy and an open and non-entrenched elite. In order for meritocracy to work, society must avoid the rigid stratification and non-existent social mobility that societies such as American society hold. A meritocratic society requires that those who are capable of appreciating high culture originate from *any* economic or social class. This system will fail in contemporary American society precisely because of the lingering barriers to education and high culture that preclude minorities from those ideals. A meritocracy perpetuates rampant inequality because it masks the fact that there are differential opportunities for individuals of different races, and instead champions the ethos of *the American Dream*. Furthermore, merit based selection confounds the notions of “most deserving” with “will do the best job”, on the basis that the latter is a conclusive

reason for the former. Meritocracy is predicated on the assumption that ability inevitably translates to ability to do the job. The elitist aspect of meritocracy arises, as the root of this issue is that those in the elite usually have established opinion on what constitutes relevant ability. In order to fully utilize meritocracy, a robust concept of the theory must be developed—one that involves the egalitarianism that it seeks to preserve.

American society is currently undergoing significant social change. Contemporary political theorists are held responsible for reformulating the iterations of democracy in the face of the changing social, political and economic landscape of the United States. In expressing a naïve, utopian iteration of democracy and subsequently contradicting their commitments to these values by reverting to elitism, modern political theorists have removed from democracy its aura of earnestness, rendering it an irrelevant guide to a previously hoped for egalitarian future. In short, modern political theorists have set themselves up for failure. It seems that contemporary political thought has conceded the prevailing inequality in America, and finds it not only compatible with the political freedom that democracy promises, but a condition of it. Modern thinkers praise democratic rule and commit to democratic values, yet place little faith on the public at large and instead put their trust in the “responsible” and “informed” elite. That democracy, and not meritocracy, is what they ostensibly advocate, even though latter is much more descriptive of reality, is an indictment on their theory. Contemporary political thought must involve the acceptance that the growing scale and increasing mobility of the population make it nearly impossible for classical democracy to flourish, that a representative democracy is essentially a meritocracy, and that clinging to the semblance of a democracy that may not have ever



existed is ultimately futile. It must involve a critical analysis of our current, meritocratic system, and consider the multiple factors that influence social and economic mobility.