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MARK BOVENS & ANCHRIT WILLE

# DIPLOMA DEMOCRACY

*The Rise of Political Meritocracy*



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The Rise of Political Meritocracy

Mark Bovens and Anchrit Wille

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

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In the course of the past years, various chapters of this book, in various stages of sophistication, have been presented as academic papers at a variety of conferences, such as the European Consortium for Political Research general conferences, the Council for European Studies conferences, the Dutch Workshop European Social Survey, and the annual Dutch-Flemish Political Science Conferences. We have benefited enormously from the comments of our discussants at these conferences, such as Paul Dekker, Harry Ganzeboom, Leah Haus, Marc Hooghe, Tom van der Meer, Christopher Lesschaeve, Martha Montero-Sieburth, Juan Rodriguez Teruel, Tim Reeskens, George Ross, Jef Smulders, Guido Tiemann, Lori Thorlakson, Bram Wauters, and Pieter de Wilde.

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# 1

## Diploma Democracy

### The Rise of Political Meritocracy

Lay politics lies at the heart of democracy. Political offices are the only offices for which no formal qualifications are required. Every adult citizen has the constitutional right to run for office. Any citizen can become a member of parliament, an alderman, or a minister, regardless of his or her educational qualifications or professional status. Lay politics was the essence of Athenian democracy after the reforms of Cleisthenes, and lay politics is still the keystone of modern representative democracy. In Germany, for example, article 38 of the *Grundgesetz* specifies that 'Any person who has attained the age of majority may be elected' to the German Bundestag. Likewise, article 4 of the Dutch *Grondwet* proclaims: 'Every Dutch citizen has the equal right to choose members of representative bodies, or to be chosen as a member'.

Contemporary political practices are diametrically opposed to this constitutional ideal. Most contemporary democracies in Western Europe are governed by a select group of well-educated citizens. They are diploma democracies—ruled by those with the highest formal qualifications. University graduates have come to dominate all relevant political institutions and arenas, from political parties, parliaments and cabinets, to organized interests, deliberative venues, and internet consultations.

Have a look at the parliaments in Western Europe. In the British House of Commons, after the 2015 elections, nine out of ten MPs were university graduates. This was the highest percentage ever in the long history of this institution. In the 2013 Bundestag, 86 per cent of the MPs had attended an institute of higher education. Only ten members, less than two per cent, had Hauptschule as their highest degree, the lowest number in the post-WWII era. After the 2012 elections, almost 97 per cent of the members of the Dutch Tweede Kamer had attended college or graduate school. More than 90 per cent had formally acquired at least a college degree—the highest percentage since the introduction of universal suffrage in 1918. In Denmark, Belgium,



and France, between 75 and 90 per cent of the MPs have the equivalent of a college or a graduate degree. This is not because everybody goes to college nowadays—over 70 per cent of the electorate in Western Europe is still only educated up to secondary level, at the highest.

This rise of a political meritocracy is part of larger trend. In the information society, educational background is a very significant social marker. Educational qualifications are important indications of social status and they are very closely correlated with lifestyle, cultural attitudes, and political preferences. Like class or religion, educational background is an important source of social and political divides.

Tell us what your highest diploma is, and we will tell you who you are and what you do. If you are a university graduate, you will watch public television, such as BBC or Canvas, and read ‘quality’ papers, such as *The Guardian*, *Die Zeit*, or *Libération*. You will do your utmost to get your children into a public school in the UK, a Gymnasium in Germany and the Netherlands, or one of the Grandes écoles in France. You will spend your holidays in an apartment in Tuscany, on a *camping écologique* in the south of France, or walking a coastal path in Britain. You will live in a university town, a green pre-war suburb, or in the nineteenth-century, gentrified parts of the inner cities, such as Prenslauer Berg in Berlin, De Pijp in Amsterdam, or Notting Hill in London. You will be moderately in favour of the European Union, worry about climate change, the state of higher education, and xenophobia, and vote for a Green or social liberal party.

On the other hand, if your educational career ended after junior high school or primary vocational training, the chances are that you will watch commercial television, such as SBS, VTM, or ITV, and read tabloid papers—if you read any newspaper at all—such as *The Sun* in England, *Bild* in Germany, or *BT* in Denmark. Your children will attend a local state school in the UK, a large ROC in the Netherlands, or a *lycée professionnel* in France. You will spend your holidays in a caravan at a local campground, make day trips to the seaside, or you will board a charter flight to a holiday resort in Spain or Turkey. You will live in former industrial areas and manufacturing towns, in the post-war satellite cities, such as Marzahn in Berlin, Lelystad in the Netherlands, or Slough in England, or, in the twentieth century, outskirts of the major cities. You will be sceptical about the EU, worry about crime and immigration, and vote for a nationalist party, or perhaps not at all.

Given these very considerable differences in lifestyle, social environment, and worldviews between well-educated and lower-educated citizens, the rise of a political meritocracy has important political consequences. Well-educated and less well-educated citizens do not always share the same concerns and preferences. Those who are well educated tend to be cosmopolitans, whereas the lower-educated citizens are more likely to be nationalists. This is

not a matter of more or less *Enlightenment*, but is related to other preferences and interests. Well-educated citizens benefit from open borders; those with less education experience the burdens of Europeanization and mass immigration. For the well-educated and their children, the free movement of persons, labour, and capital within the EU offers many opportunities to study and work abroad. For those with less education and their children, it means having to cope with increasing competition in the labour market, a boarding house for Bulgarian migrant workers next door, and an influx of non-native speakers in their schools and neighbourhoods.

## Plato's Dream Come True

This book documents the rise of a political meritocracy and its consequences for democracy and the political landscape in Western Europe. As with many pieces of political theory, the roots of this essay can be traced to Plato. Each year, the students at both our institutes read Plato's *Republic*. In the introductory lectures, Plato is traditionally portrayed as the counterpoint of democratic governance as we know it. Over the past years we had both grown increasingly uncomfortable with the juxtaposition of Plato's meritocratic polity, run by philosopher-kings, and contemporary parliamentary democracy, supposedly run by ordinary citizens. This juxtaposition simply no longer rang true. Upon closer inspection, modern parliamentary democracy comes surprisingly close to Plato's ideal of a state governed by academically trained experts.

Plato's ideal state, as sketched at length in the *Republic*, is ruled by the best and the brightest, carefully selected after years of study and rigorous intellectual tests and academic trials. His political class is an academic upper crust, a small professorial *corps d'élite*, consisting of the brightest men and women of the *polis*. This book will argue that Plato's supposedly utopian ideal, of a state governed by academic experts, has more or less been realized in contemporary Western European parliamentary democracies. The selection mechanisms and the institutional context may be different, but the outcomes are surprisingly, and discomfitingly, alike. An example is the former Belgian federal cabinet-Di Rupo that was installed in 2011. All thirteen new ministers were extremely well educated: they all had, at the very minimum, a master's degree (*licentiaat*). Several ministers had completed two studies, and at least three held PhD degrees. Eight had worked at a university before embarking on a political career and two, Johan Vande Lanotte and Paul Magnette, retained their chairs as university professors while in office. Likewise, in the third Merkel cabinet, installed in Germany in 2013, fourteen out of fifteen ministers had the equivalent of a master's degree, nine had a PhD degree, seven had worked at a university, and two were university professors before entering politics.

In many Western democracies, all branches of government are dominated by the well-educated. This holds true for almost every other political arena, as we will demonstrate in this book. Modern parliamentary democracy is a Platonic meritocracy, a state run by university graduates and former academics. Plato's dream has come true.

## Diploma Democracy

The concept of meritocracy was coined by Michael Young in his satirical essay *The rise of the meritocracy*, first published in 1958, from which we take our subtitle. The book was written as a fable, as a quasi-scientific report situated in 2034. It fits within the British tradition of dystopian science fiction novels, such as Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *Brave New World*. In his fictional report, Young describes how the British class system transformed from an aristocracy into a meritocracy between 1945 and 2034. This was purportedly the result of the expansion of higher education and the application of strictly scientific principles to the admission of students to schools, and to the selection of personnel in firms, officials in the civil services, and leaders in politics and business. Merit—defined as IQ+effort—determined social status, instead of birth, inheritance, or nepotism.

In his introduction to the Transaction edition, Young (1994) describes how difficult it was to get the book published. The manuscript was turned down by eleven publishers and was only published because a friend had started a publishing house. Soon after, however, Penguin picked it up and in the sixties, hundreds of thousands of copies were sold. According to Young, the title must have been one of the reasons for its success. His neologism 'meritocracy'—partly Latin, partly Greek—was attractive to many, because of the role it assigned to education. 'In all industrial societies the growth of massive educational systems has been one of the most significant phenomena of the century' (Young 1994: xiv). However, 'meritocracy' did not become a current concept for empirical, descriptive reasons alone. The notion of meritocracy also legitimized new forms of social stratification. Social class was the most familiar form of closure in Britain at the time Young's essay was published, and so the notion of meritocracy could be read as an attack on class stratification (Dench 2006). It legitimized new forms of elite formation based on educational achievements and technical qualifications. Also, it fitted very nicely within the neo-liberal worldview that became dominant in the latter half of the twentieth century, because it implies that individuals, through their competencies and efforts, are responsible for their own career.<sup>1</sup>

Young's book was written as fiction, whereas our book is definitely meant as a work of non-fiction. Over the past half-century, the concept

of meritocracy—literally ‘rule by the meritorious’—has become a standard concept in social and political theory. It is a contested concept, however, as ‘merit’ can be defined in many ways. In this book, merit is used in the Platonic sense of prolonged intellectual and academic training. In modern society, there is a convenient indicator for this type of merit: the length of formal education, as measured by the highest diploma. We therefore use the term *diploma democracy* as shorthand for a modern political meritocracy. A diploma democracy is a democracy which is dominated by the citizens with the highest formal education qualifications. In less academic terms: a diploma democracy is ruled by the citizens with the highest degrees.

## Exploring the Rise of Political Meritocracy

This book explores the context, contours, and consequences of the rise of such an education-based, political meritocracy. It is an amplification of an earlier book on diploma democracy, which was published in Dutch (Bovens & Wille 2011). Its aim is first of all to explore the extent to which contemporary West European democracies are dominated by higher educated citizens. Originally, our study was confined to the Dutch parliamentary democracy, with which we are most familiar. However, in this book, we will expand our argument to other advanced West European democracies, notably Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, and the UK. An analysis of national and international survey data will be made to examine trends with regard to voting and a range of other forms of political participation, participation in civil society organizations, and the educational stratification of the political elites.

Secondly, our aim is to discuss the consequences of this rise of political meritocracy. After all, why should the rise of an education-based meritocracy in politics be something to worry about? Is it not reassuring to know that our representatives and leaders have had such a solid academic grounding? Plato, the founder of the first Academy, certainly thought so. He would probably have approved of the professorial Di Rupo and Merkel Cabinets. However, the rise of an education-based meritocracy does not fit easily within the normative foundations of modern representative democracy. According to Robert Dahl (1979: 131), the great theorist of modern democracy, ‘the doctrine of meritocracy [is] the enduring rival to democratic ideas.’

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

represented. For example, surveys suggest that those with lower education qualifications predominantly worry about crime, social security, and the cost of living, whereas the well-educated are much more concerned about the quality of schools. Also, the well-educated are much more positive about the benefits of the EU and immigration than the less well-educated segments of the population. Such biases in representational relationships can be a serious threat to the legitimacy and stability of parliamentary democracy.

This book has limited ambitions. We want to document the rise of political meritocracy and discuss its consequences. We look at European countries where we would expect the rise of political meritocracy to be more prominent than elsewhere in the light of their high percentages of well-educated citizens and the meritocratic character of the educational system and the labour market in these countries. The countries in question are Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, the UK, and, to a lesser extent, Germany and France. We substantiate this selection in Chapter 4. We could have included other countries, such as Austria, Switzerland, or Finland, but we have refrained from doing so for pragmatic reasons. This is not a study in comparative politics; we will not systematically compare a range of parliamentary democracies in order to document dissimilarities or to charter the workings of the different political systems. Our undertaking is first of all explorative and argumentative. Therefore, a few prominent cases will do. Focusing on a restricted set of similar cases leads us to answer the general question of what is common to all cases, rather than the question of variation between them (Caramani 2010). However, at some points in the argument we will present more general data on larger samples of European countries, to put our findings in a broader perspective. And, when looking at civil society and the political elites, we also will take the EU level into account.

We also would like to emphasize that this is an argumentative rather than an explanatory study. The main aim of our exercise is to take stock of the education gaps in political participation. That is, to *describe* the differences among educational groups and at some point later in this book to consider their political implications. We realize that description 'is not very fashionable in political science these days' (Schlozman et al. 2012: xxi) and often considered, mistakenly, a 'mundane task' or 'residual category' of 'little intrinsic scientific value' (Gerring 2012: 721). However, a better and more complete description of the educational differences in the full range of political participatory behaviours is helpful to gain a better picture of the extent to which contemporary West European democracies are diploma democracies.

Our main purpose, therefore, is not to *explain* who is active and who is not. We are not primarily interested in explaining political behaviour or even in explaining the rise of political meritocracy. We are not election researchers,

seeking to explain and predict voting patterns and other forms of political behaviour. We will use data gathered in election studies and social surveys, but our agenda is different from theirs. We are interested in the macro effects on representative democracy of the dominance of the well-educated, not in the effects of education per se. However, we will discuss in passing social mechanisms that might elucidate this dominance of well-educated groups in politics. What is so important about education? Does it enhance efficacy, skills, or political socialization? Or is it a proxy for other factors, such as cognitive abilities, network position, or socio-economic status? Is the absence of less-educated citizens in political office caused by educational inflation, or is it a side effect of the decline of mass organizations and the transformation of political parties and social movements into professional organizations? These issues will be discussed in the course of our examination of the major political arenas in parliamentary democracies.

## **Outline: Concepts, Contours, and Consequences of Diploma Democracy**

The first part of the book introduces our main *concepts* and *contexts*. Chapter 2 is concerned with diplomas and the educational expansion. It demarcates the various educational categories, it documents the spectacular rise in the number of well-educated citizens over the past decades, and it explores to what extent this educational revolution has constituted a new critical juncture in society. Chapter 3 is concerned with democracy and the participatory expansion. It discusses the various conceptions of representative democracy that are relevant for an assessment of the rise of political meritocracy, and it explores the potential effects of the participatory revolution on democratic equity. Chapter 4 explores to what extent an emerging social and political educational cleavage can be observed across Europe. By using a broad notion of cleavage, which includes socio-structural differences, attitudinal, and institutional-behavioral differences, we attempt to establish to what extent the advent of new divisions related to the expansion of higher education occurs across a range of European countries.

The second part of the book sketches the *contours* of an emerging diploma democracy in six mature Western European democracies: Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK. Chapter 5 examines the differences between educational groups regarding the major forms of political participation. Chapter 6 does the same for civil society and organized interests. Chapter 7 concentrates on the meritocratization of the political elites.

The *consequences* of diploma democracy are the subject of the third and final part. In Chapter 8 we assess the rise of diploma democracy and discuss some potential tensions between political meritocracy and representative democracy, such as descriptive deficits, policy incongruences, biased standards, and cynicism and distrust. Finally, Chapter 9 looks at ways to remedy, or at least mitigate, some of the negative effects of diploma democracy.

### Note

1. See Donovan (2006) and Mijs (2015) for the mixed reception of Young's essay.

Part I

## **Concepts and Contexts**



