

Passage 1. *Adrian Wooldridge argues in favour of meritocracy.*

- 1 It is now commonplace that the ideas which have shaped and sustained Western societies for the past 250 years or more are faltering. Democracy is in retreat. Liberalism is struggling. Capitalism has lost its lustre. But there is one idea that still commands widespread enthusiasm: that an individual's position in society should depend on his or her combination of ability and effort. Meritocracy, a word invented as recently as 1958 by the British sociologist Michael Young, is the closest thing we have today to a universal ideology. 5
- 2 The definition of the word gives us a sense of why meritocracy is so popular. A meritocratic society combines four qualities which are each in themselves admirable. First, it prides itself on the extent to which people can get ahead in life on the basis of their natural talents. Second, it tries to secure equality of opportunity by providing education for all. Third, it forbids discrimination on the basis of race and sex and other irrelevant characteristics. Fourth, it awards jobs through open competition rather than patronage and nepotism. Social mobility and meritocracy are the strawberries and cream of modern political thinking, and politicians can always earn applause by denouncing unearned privilege. Meritocracy's success in crossing boundaries – ideological and cultural, geographical and political – is striking. 10 15
- 3 However, some argue that meritocracy is now the opposite of what it was intended to be: a way of transmitting inherited privilege from one generation to another through the mechanism of elite education. Members of the elite spend millions of dollars purchasing educational advantage for their children, sometimes by moving to the right school districts, sometimes by sending their children to the right private schools, but always by providing them with a rich diet of extracurricular activities. At the same time, poorer children are trapped at the bottom of the ladder, weighed down from the get-go by poor infant care, poor schools and general lack of opportunity. This palace of illusions is also a factory of misery. 20
- 4 We should nevertheless be cautious about rejecting an idea that is so central to modernity. The relevant question is surely not whether meritocracy has faults. It is whether it has fewer faults than alternative systems. Meritocracy's advocates do not argue that it is perfect. They argue that it does a better job than the alternatives of reconciling various goods that are inevitably in tension with each other – for example, social justice and economic efficiency and individual aspiration and limited opportunities. 25
- 5 Meritocracy succeeds because it does a better job than the alternatives of reconciling the two great tensions at the heart of modernity: between efficiency and fairness on the one hand, and between moral equality and social differentiation on the other. It screens job applicants for competence. Vaccines save our lives rather than poisoning us because highly trained scientists develop them and other highly trained scientists test and regulate them. But, at the same time, meritocracy gives everybody a chance to put their name into the sorting hat. 30
- 6 The meritocratic idea made the modern world, sweeping aside race and sex-based barriers to competition, building ladders of opportunity from the bottom of society to the top, and electrifying sluggish institutions with intelligence and energy. Discrimination on the basis of race and sex is now illegal across the advanced world. Women take up more than half of the places in most Western (and in many emerging country) universities. Kamala Harris, a woman of Jamaican and Indian heritage, is vice-president of the United States, and may well follow Barack Obama to the Oval Office. None of that would have been possible without the meritocratic idea. 35 40

Adapted from The Aristocracy of Talent: How Meritocracy Made the Modern World, by Adrian Wooldridge, June 2021

Passage 2. *Clifton Mark argues that a belief in meritocracy is detrimental.*

- 1 Meritocracy has become a leading social ideal. Politicians across the ideological spectrum continually return to the theme that the rewards of life – money, power, jobs, university admission – should be distributed according to skill and effort. The most common metaphor is the ‘even playing field’ upon which players can rise to the position that fits their merit. Conceptually and morally, meritocracy is presented as the opposite of systems such as hereditary aristocracy, in which one’s social position is determined by the lottery of birth. Under meritocracy, wealth and advantage are merit’s rightful compensation, not the fortuitous windfall of external events. 5
- 2 Although widely held, the belief that merit rather than luck determines success or failure in the world is demonstrably false. This is not least because merit itself is, in large part, the result of luck. Luck intervenes by granting people merit, and again by furnishing circumstances in which merit can translate into success. This is not to deny the industry and talent of successful people. However, it does demonstrate that the link between merit and outcome is tenuous and indirect at best. Many have merit, but few succeed. What separates the two is luck. 10
- 3 In addition to being false, a growing body of research in psychology and neuroscience suggests that believing in meritocracy makes people more selfish, less self-critical and even more prone to acting in discriminatory ways. Meritocracy is not only wrong; it is bad. 15
- 4 Perhaps more disturbing, simply holding meritocracy as a value seems to promote discriminatory behaviour. Researchers who studied attempts to implement meritocratic practices, such as performance-based compensation in private companies, found that, in companies that explicitly held meritocracy as a core value, managers assigned greater rewards to male employees over female employees with identical performance evaluations. This preference disappeared where meritocracy was not explicitly adopted as a value. 20
- 5 This is surprising because impartiality is the core of meritocracy’s moral appeal. The ‘even playing field’ is intended to avoid unfair inequalities based on gender, race and the like. Yet researchers found that, ironically, attempts to implement meritocracy lead to just the kinds of inequalities that it aims to eliminate. They suggest that this ‘paradox of meritocracy’ occurs because explicitly adopting meritocracy as a value convinces subjects of their own moral worth. Satisfied that they are just, they become less inclined to examine their own behaviour for signs of prejudice. 25
- 6 However, in addition to legitimation, meritocracy also offers flattery. Where success is determined by merit, each win can be viewed as a reflection of one’s own virtue and worth. Meritocracy is the most self-congratulatory of distribution principles. Its ideological alchemy transmutes property into praise, material inequality into personal superiority. It licenses the rich and powerful to view themselves as productive geniuses. While this effect is most spectacular among the elite, nearly any accomplishment can be viewed through meritocratic eyes. Graduating from high school, artistic success or simply having money can all be seen as evidence of talent and effort. By the same token, worldly failures become signs of personal defects, providing a reason why those at the bottom of the social hierarchy deserve to remain there. 30 35
- 7 Despite the moral assurance and personal flattery that meritocracy offers to the successful, it ought to be abandoned both as a belief about how the world works and as a general social ideal. It is false, and believing in it encourages selfishness, discrimination and indifference to the plight of the unfortunate. 40

Adapted from <https://aeon.co/ideas/a-belief-in-meritocracy-is-not-only-false-its-bad-for-you> (8 March 2019)

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