British Journal of Political Science (2025), **55**, e171, 1–18
doi:10.1017/S0007123425101142

British Journal of Political Science

ARTICLE

Defensible Democratic Meritocracy: A Competition-Based Account

Zhichao Tong[1,2]

[1]Center for Chinese Public Administration Research, Sun Yat-Sen University, Guangzhou, China and [2]School of Government, Sun Yat-Sen University, Guangzhou, China
Email: tongzhch3@mail.sysu.edu.cn

(Received 11 May 2025; revised 27 October 2025; accepted 28 October 2025)

Abstract
The article offers a new defense of democratic meritocracy. Existing defenses of the hybrid regime have centered on ordinary citizens' lack of sophisticated political knowledge and the importance of having particularly able individuals in charge of governing. But since electoral democracy also contains certain built-in mechanisms that, when combined with a functioning party system, are capable of reducing the cognitive burdens of average voters and empowering more competent individuals, such defenses fail to make a compelling case for democratic meritocracy. Specifically, they owe us a fully developed account of how those mechanisms of electoral democracy will be weakened by its other inherent features so that the hybrid regime becomes a desirable alternative. This article provides such an account by exploring how a well-designed democratic meritocracy can better avoid pathologies of unconstrained political competition that are not only troublesome in themselves but which also undermine electoral democracy's ability to generate superior political outcomes.

Keywords: Democratic theory; political meritocracy; political competition; institutional design

Introduction

In recent years, there have been growing debates over the desirability of electoral democracy in both Western democratic theory and Confucian political theory. While discussions in the former have produced arguments for and against epistocracy and lottocracy, as well as more realistic justifications of electoral democracy on the grounds of ensuring social peace and resisting state capture, one notable proposal emerging out of the latter is the ideal of *democratic meritocracy* advocated by a group of scholars known as 'Confucian meritocrats' (Bagg 2018, 2024; Bai 2020; Bell 2006, 2015; Brennan 2016; Chan 2014; Guerrero 2024; Lafont and Urbinati 2024; Landa and Pevnick 2020, 2021, 2025; Landemore 2020; Lopez-Guerra 2014). Broadly speaking, democratic meritocracy refers to a hybrid regime that combines political meritocracy not only with electoral democracy but also with democratic innovations in the form of lottocratic institutions (Bitton 2024, Tong 2025).[1] However, existing defenses of this hybridity have centered on ordinary citizens' lack of sophisticated political knowledge and the importance of having particularly able

[1]Among Confucian meritocrats advocating for democratic meritocracy, there are those who believe that the meritocratic component should play a weaker role in governance (Chan 2014) and those who believe that it should play a stronger role (Bai 2020, Bell 2015). By contrast, the term 'meritocratic democracy' refers not to a hybrid regime combining meritocracy and democracy, but an electoral democracy with more meritocratic political parties (Ziliotti 2024, 152).

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123425101142 Published online by Cambridge University Press

individuals in charge of governing. But since electoral democracy also contains certain built-in mechanisms that, when combined with a functioning party system, are capable of reducing the cognitive burdens of average voters and empowering more competent individuals, such defenses fail to make a compelling case for democratic meritocracy (Landa and Pevnick 2020; Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018; Ziliotti 2024).[2] Specifically, they owe us a fully developed account of how those mechanisms of electoral democracy will be weakened by its other inherent features so that the hybrid regime becomes a desirable alternative. In this article, I address such a question by presenting a new, competition-based defense of democratic meritocracy. My central claim is that the hybrid regime, when properly designed, can better avoid pathologies of unconstrained political competition that are not only troublesome in themselves but which also undermine electoral democracy's ability to generate superior political outcomes. The article thus contributes to both normative evaluations of political regimes and debates about the value of political competition.

Regarding normative evaluations of political regimes, electoral democracy now faces the challenge of non-democratic and non-electoral alternatives including epistocracy, lottocracy, and political meritocracy. However, existing comparisons of them tend to focus on the pros and cons of one selection mechanism vis-à-vis another and fail to fully appreciate the fact of institutional pluralism within a complex political system, the interactions of diverse offices at the system level, and the potential of hybrid models for institutional designs (Wu 2024). To be clear, Confucian meritocrats' initial articulation of democratic meritocracy does attempt to treat it as a system-level ideal combining meritocracy and democracy (Bell 2006, 162). However, their subsequent elaborations have not properly explained how the meritocratic component could coherently fit with the democratic component so that the hybrid regime would not be self-contradictory (Kim 2016, 5–6). By contrast, what I hope to offer through my new defense of democratic meritocracy is also a well-designed, more defensible version of it, one which clearly illustrates why political meritocracy, electoral democracy, and lottocratic institutions should be combined into a hybrid regime and how a division of normative labor can be maintained among them.

With respect to the value of political competition, democratic politics can usually be divided into a competitive mode and a non-competitive mode (Agmon 2022, 12; Mansbridge 1983). Of those two modes, the competitive one has gained more traction with Western democratic theorists, who come to view political competition largely as a positive good that nevertheless needs to be appropriately regulated to ensure its fairness and effectiveness (Beitz 2024; Chapman 2024; Knight and Schwartzberg 2024). At the same time, Confucian meritocrats have raised concerns about antagonistic political competition in electoral democracy, which they regard as detrimental not only to individuals' moral well-being but also to the good governance of a political community (Bell 2015, 54; Chan 2014, 87). By providing a competition-based defense of democratic meritocracy, I seek to balance the two positions and elaborate on what I take to be appropriate limits of political competition, as well as why keeping it within those limits may require us to go beyond electoral democracy and embrace a hybrid regime incorporating political meritocracy, electoral democracy, and lottocratic institutions.

The article is organized as follows. I first identify a series of problems associated with the horizontal dimension of political competition in electoral democracy that pits people against each other (Hussain 2020). I then consider how those problems can become pathological when political competition is not kept within appropriate limits and why political competition in many electoral democracies today tends to step out of such limits. Three prominent sets of institutional arrangements that have the potential to keep political competition within appropriate limits are subsequently scrutinized, namely, those which can be adopted by electoral democracy, those

[2]For instance, proponents of 'responsible parties' have argued that strong, centralized parties can help to formulate more coherent policies in electoral democracy, whereas advocates of 'intraparty meritocracy' contend that ethical screenings can be established by political parties to improve the quality of their nominees for elected offices (Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018; Ziliotti 2024).

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offered by the lottoratic alternative, and those of political meritocracy. For each of them, I examine the extent to which it can succeed in moderating political competition, as well as whether it has other weaknesses that will negatively impact a political community. Finally, I take a *systemic approach* and merge those arrangements into my proposal of defensible democratic meritocracy where they can compensate for each other's weaknesses, and which thereby represents a desirable alternative to electoral democracy.[3]

Before proceeding to the main argument, three things need to be clarified. First, given space constraints, the article focuses on how institutional arrangements that are particularly salient in political theory today can be combined to address pathologies of unconstrained political competition. This is not to deny that such pathologies may also be tempered via non-institutional means, by rites and norms which will take another paper to explore. Still, the institutional-centered perspective offered here could be viewed as complementary to a non-institutional one, given that well-designed institutions will have socializing effects on individuals and shape their normative orientations (Chan 2014, 69). Second, the kind of democratic meritocracy that I am going to defend is an idealized model that does not yet have a perfect counterpart in reality. Whether any existing regime should be altered to match such a model is a practical question that requires taking transition costs into consideration, and which I thereby cannot answer in this theoretical paper. Finally, contrary to what some of its supporters and critics have claimed, I do not regard a hybrid regime containing political meritocracy as categorically less compatible with political equality (Bai 2020; Kim 2016, 2023). This is because, as Landa and Pevnick (2025) have pointed out, there is no firm basis for ranking electoral democracy, political meritocracy, and lottocracy on egalitarian grounds (2025, chapters 4–5). Specifically, although electoral democracy may enjoy an advantage over political meritocracy and lottocracy with respect to ensuring non-officeholders' ongoing political influence, political meritocracy and lottocracy can outperform electoral democracy in terms of granting all citizens fair access to political office (Landa and Pevnick 2025, 56–7). Therefore, one potential strength of a well-designed hybrid regime is that it can be more pluralistically egalitarian by having its different institutions embodying different facets of political equality, a point to which I shall return in the conclusion.

Electoral Democracy, Political Competition, and Pitting People Against Each Other

Standard accounts of political competition in electoral democracy tend to focus on its *vertical dimension*, namely, the kind of relationship which it establishes between the people and their government. In particular, competitive elections have been understood both as a mechanism for citizens to *select* internally motivated politicians who will act more competently on their behalf, and as a mechanism for them to induce good behaviors from externally motivated politicians out of the latter's fear of being *sanctioned* at the next election (Mansbridge 2009; Landa and Pevnick 2020). When combined with a functioning party system, those two mechanisms enable electoral democracy to generate superior political outcomes without placing excessive cognitive burdens on average voters (Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018; Ziliotti 2024). Moreover, the selection mechanism has been further used by some Confucian political theorists to recast electoral democracy in Confucian terms, as a regime through which virtuous and capable leaders can be selected and public endorsements of their selection are explicitly revealed (Chan 2014, 85; Kim 2014, 182). According to this interpretation, electoral democracy can help to establish the Confucian ideal political relationship between the rulers and the ruled, where the former 'are committed to governing the people in a trustworthy and caring manner' and the latter 'express their willing endorsement and support of their rulers' (Chan 2014, 85).

[3]My systemic approach is inspired by the one taken by advocates of deliberative systems, who hold that 'failures in one institution can be compensated for in another part' (Mansbridge et al. 2012, 22). However, I differ from them by (1) not treating deliberativeness as the sole overriding ideal; and (2) looking beyond purely democratic systems.

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However, political competition in electoral democracy also has a *horizontal dimension*, where it defines the kind of relationship between different political camps. Here, competitive elections have put in place a confrontational institutional structure that pits people against each other (Hussain 2020, 80). Such an institutional structure is then combined with party politics and sets off dynamics of society-wide partisan contestation (Rosenblum 2008; Muirhead 2014; White and Ypi 2016). Specifically, to secure public offices distributed via competitive elections, party leaders and party nominees have to mobilize their loyal supporters across the society, including party activists, average partisans, and aligned interest groups, so as to together formulate and carry out plans that aim to prevent the other side from winning those offices. Through such a rivalrous process, electoral democracy has created strong structural incentives for individuals to actively undermine the political aspirations of those across the partisan divide (Hussain 2020, 94).

But why is this pitting people against each other problematic? To this question, I want to first provide two sets of answers, from a relational egalitarian perspective and a Confucian perspective respectively. From a relational egalitarian perspective, this pitting people against each other is problematic because it erodes fabrics of civic friendship via affective polarization, the inevitable byproduct of the combination of electoral competition and party politics in electoral democracy. Democracy as a way of life has been thought to be valuable since it helps individuals to relate to one another as equals (Anderson 2009; Kolodny 2014; Viehoff 2014; Wilson 2019). This relational egalitarian ideal can be divided into a negative and a positive one. The negative ideal focuses on the avoidance of bad, inegalitarian relationships such as those of subordination and domination (Anderson 2009, 219; Kolodny 2014, 292; Lovett 2024 20). In practice, this avoidance in electoral democracy is facilitated by constraints which electoral accountability has placed on politicians (Ingham 2022, 697–8). By contrast, the positive ideal aims to achieve a good, egalitarian relationship among citizens along the model of civic friendship (Lovett 2024, 39; Viehoff 2014, 353; Wilson 2019, 56). Although this positive ideal is also central to the justification of democratic authority, its realization in electoral democracy has been found to be impaired by a phenomenon now commonly labeled as 'affective polarization', which refers to the growing distrust, dislike, and contempt felt between supporters of different parties not only in the political realm, but also in everyday interactions and life choices (Lovett 2024, 211; Viehoff 2014, 352; Iyengar et al. 2019, 136; Wilson 2019, 57). Ultimately, such cross-partisan animosity across various domains of social life precludes cross-partisan civic friendship, which requires partisan opponents to hold positive beliefs about one another (Lovett 2024, 212).

To make the situation worse, affective polarization is not an empirical phenomenon whose causes can be attributed solely to the rise of partisan media and the increasing socio-economic inequalities faced by existing electoral democracies in America, Europe, and Asia (Cheong and Haggard 2023; Gidron et al. 2020; Settle 2018).[4] Instead, it is something to be expected from the regime given how it combines electoral competition and party politics. This is because political parties cannot function as stable organizations capable of competing in democratic elections on a large-scale and long-term basis if they are merely strategic vehicles through which their supporters seek to advance their individually preferred policies (Chapman 2024, 163). Rather, those supporters have to develop strong emotional attachments to the party itself as a group in order to enable the sustained collective action required by society-wide partisan contestation, be it about voter mobilization, serving as an organized opposition, or constructing a governing coalition (Chapman 2024, 164). Consequently, partisanship is bound to become a salient group identity through which members of the mass public see themselves and others in electoral democracy.[5]

[4]Though the rise of partisan media and increasing socio-economic inequalities have surely worsened affective polarization.

[5]I say 'members of the mass public' because the salience of partisan identity may be reduced within specially designed deliberative spaces such as mini-publics and partisan juries (Fishkin et al. 2021; Wolkenstein 2020, 122; Ziliotti 2024, 136–7). Indeed, this is one of the appeals of lottocratic institutions. However, scaling up those democratic innovations and making their recommendations authoritative remain challenges in electoral democracy.

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According to social identity theory, the salience of this group identity then paves the way for affective polarization by triggering partisans' positive sentiments towards in-group members and their negative sentiments towards out-group members (Iyengar et al. 2012, 407–8).

From a Confucian perspective, the way in which political competition in electoral democracy pits people against each other is problematic because it undermines people's ability to display benevolence or *ren* (仁), the Confucian virtue par excellence, as well as the pursuit of harmony or *he* (和), the Confucian ideal state of affairs. Regarding benevolence or *ren*, scholarly interpretations have portrayed it as a *care-centered* or a *care-originating* virtue displayed through exhibiting affective concern for others (Li 2024, 54; Star 2002, 85). Specifically, a person of *ren* should feel the relevance of others, act for their welfare, and wish for their good (Li 2024, 62). However, as I have pointed out, partisan opponents in electoral democracy are incentivized to actively undermine one another's political aspirations through electoral competition. The phenomenon of affective polarization which we have just examined further subverts the sense of tender loving feelings which persons of *ren* are supposed to share in other, non-political domains of social life. Such a situation, however, would not be the case had individuals' partisan identities not been made so salient by society-wide partisan contestation in electoral democracy.

In terms of harmony or *he*, the Confucian conception of it has been characterized as 'a continuous process of adjusting differences and reconciling conflicts' via mutual accommodation (Li 2014, 9). The value of accommodation emphasized here further consists of three different facets, namely, an epistemic openness to rethinking one's views, a tactfulness to act in ways that minimize damages to broader relationships with individuals holding opposite views, and a willingness to compromise for the sake of sustaining relationships with disagreeing others (Wong 2020, 144). In this regard, Confucian harmony remains a quite attractive ideal for modern pluralistic societies (Wong 2020, 148). But the practical pursuit of it could also be easily disrupted by the combination of electoral competition and party politics in electoral democracy, which works against all three aspects of accommodation just mentioned. After all, insofar as large-scale and long-term electoral competition has to be organized by political parties, it will almost certainly encourage the cultivation of partisanship operating both as an entrenched mindset and as a salient group identity. As an entrenched mindset, partisanship entails a form of deliberate close-mindedness among partisans, so that they will be able to more consistently stand with their own side by exhibiting an especially strong and partly blind commitment to its positions (Landemore 2018, 796). The epistemic openness as required by Confucian harmony is thereby being thwarted. As a salient group identity, partisanship allows underlying differences to be exploited by partisan campaigns and partisan media to generate sharper divisions (Bell 2015, 55). Such a development not only makes cross-partisan compromises more difficult in political decision making, but also damages, as shown by affective polarization, cross-partisan relationships in other, non-political domains of social life.

Taken together, those problems associated with the horizontal dimension of political competition in electoral democracy will, if they become pathological, significantly weaken the selection and sanctioning mechanisms that enable the regime to generate superior political outcomes. This is because the functioning of both mechanisms requires citizens to make their electoral choice on the basis of the quality and performance of their current or potential representatives nominated by political parties, rather than just the party brand which they themselves affiliate with or align against.[6] Yet, the latter scenario, which would render the electorate less willing to check elected politicians' authoritarian ambitions and incompetent candidates more likely to be selected than competent ones, can emerge when citizens come to treat those across the partisan divide as civic enemies whom they must defeat at the ballot box, and with

[6]To be clear, party brands may serve as information shortcuts for citizens to know about particular candidates. Still, the long-term effectiveness of such shortcuts depends on citizens being able to test their reliability by not allowing party brands to determine their electoral choice.

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whom they share little affection and refuse to accommodate (Strayhorn 2025; Svolik 2019). In this regard, Confucian meritocrats are correct to view antagonistic political competition in electoral democracy as detrimental not only to individuals' moral well-being, but also to the good governance of a political community (Bell 2015, 54; Chan 2014, 87).

Appropriate Limits of Political Competition: The Stakes and Spread

Of course, pitting people against each other is perhaps unavoidable for competitive institutions that, when properly arranged, can be overall beneficial, and which will be present in almost all human societies (Hussain 2020, 80). The key question, however, is whether the competition can be kept within appropriate limits so that it will not seriously endanger other valuable goods upon which its continuous, effective operation depends, including, as we have seen, some levels of civic friendship, benevolent feelings, and harmonious relations among citizens. The answer here, I believe, has a lot to do with the *stakes* and *spread* of the competition. Specifically, I argue that a competition which is both *high in stakes* and *widely spread* is more likely to step out of appropriate limits. By the stakes of a competition, I am referring to the size of rewards for its winner(s). Think of a tennis game which two friends agree to play regularly, the loser of which has to buy the winner that day's lunch. It is unlikely to do any damage to their friendship no matter how the game goes because it is a competition of extremely small stakes, one which determines only a person's access to a minor good. By the spread of the competition, I am referring to the number of people who actively participate in it. Think of a competitive game between two professional sports teams, the result of which will determine each team player's career prospects, financial compensations, and social status. It is conceivable that such high stakes may transform their rivalry into enmity, where members of each team genuinely wish ill upon those of the other. Still, the wider community does not have to be much concerned about disruptions posed by this enmity to either benevolent feelings shared by the vast majority of its citizens or their harmonious relations because it is generated by a competition involving only a few individuals.

To some extent, philosophers working on the ethical limitations of the market have long been arguing for something similar to my suggestion above, about why economic competition should be kept within appropriate limits so that values of personal relationships, communal solidarity, and the common good can be better preserved (Anderson 1990; Sandel 2012; Satz 2010). Indeed, one potential justification of a generous welfare state is that it helps to achieve such a goal by reducing the stakes and/or narrowing the spread of economic competition (Hussain 2020, 105). Imagine a society with universal basic service: the stakes of its economic competition are reduced because it will only determine one's possession of luxury goods, but not one's access to public transport, social housing, education, and healthcare. Now take a society with universal basic income as another example: the spread of its economic competition is narrowed because more people can afford to not always be in the labor market and constantly thinking about how to beat out other job contenders.

Compared with economic competition, less attention has been paid to how political competition can be kept within appropriate limits.[7] This is especially the case with political competition in electoral democracy, which is now often both high in stakes and widely spread. It is high in stakes because competitive elections are used to distribute the most powerful public office(s) within a modern state that has also itself become more powerful and interventionalist in response to growing numbers of collective action problems generated by our increasing human interdependence and the increased complexity of the modern economy (Mansbridge 2022 206). This latter sociological development is of particular significance. What it demonstrates is that the

[7]I say this because even the burgeoning literature on political polarization has focused more on tactics adopted by individuals in political competition (e.g., the use of polarizing rhetoric) than on the limits of political competition. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this point.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123425101142 Published online by Cambridge University Press

stakes of political competition in many electoral democracies today are vastly different from those in the nineteenth or even the early twentieth century, when the government could remain relatively inactive and small because it did not have to regulate a complex modern economy and come up with concrete ways to produce public goods, including a stable climate, clean air, and clean water, which then seemed to be in infinite supply (Mansbridge 2022 207–8).[8]

Political competition in electoral democracy is widely spread because its active participants include party leaders, party nominees, party activists, average partisans, and aligned interest groups, who together make up a significant portion of the overall population.[9] Moreover, it is reasonable to assume that, as the stakes of political competition increase with the expanded role of the government, its spread in electoral democracy may also be widened. This is because individuals whose lives are more directly affected by governmental actions will become more attached to their partisan rather than other social identities and participate more as members of warring tribes in the game which decides the control of the government. Scholars of American politics, for instance, have found that the emergence of an activist federal state during the 1960s fundamentally transformed the country's originally decentralized party structures and allowed each party to take more distinct ideological stances, which contributed to the sorting of multiple social identities along partisan lines, the nationalization of political conflict, the dramatic decline of split-ticket voting, and fiercer electoral competition (Abramowitz and Webster 2018; Lee 2016; Mason 2018; Pierson and Schicker 2024).

It is easy to see how the problems of pitting people against each other identified in the last section can become pathological as a result of the increasing stakes and widening spread of political competition in electoral democracy. After all, insofar as more individuals become consistently loyal towards their own party, and rally behind its fight for the control of a government capable of intervening in a wider range of issues, it will be harder for them to wear their party spirit *lightly* (Muirhead 2014, 17). Instead, partisanship is almost destined to become a much more entrenched mindset and salient group identity among the mass public, which makes the establishment of cross-partisan civic friendship, the display of benevolence towards partisan opponents, the pursuit of inter-party harmony, and ultimately the proper selection and sanctioning of politicians much more difficult. Under such circumstances, particularly able individuals may also decline to run for public office, given the tolls which enduring partisan attacks will take on their personal lives. Therefore, even if we accept the need for political competition, it is still important to investigate how it can be kept within appropriate limits. In the next two sections, I will first examine three prominent sets of institutional arrangements that have the potential to do so, before taking a systemic approach and combining them into my proposal of defensible democratic meritocracy.

Institutional Arrangements for Keeping Political Competition Within Appropriate Limits

Generally speaking, we can identify three prominent sets of institutional arrangements in political theory today that have the potential to keep political competition within appropriate limits by reducing its stakes and/or narrowing its spread: those which can be adopted by electoral democracy, those offered by the lottocratic alternative, and those of political meritocracy. In this section, I will consider them in this order and examine their respective strengths and weaknesses. I choose to place meritocratic institutions last not because I take them to be less important, but

[8]This is why today even a functioning 'small government' as advocated by some center-right politicians will still be pretty powerful and large by historical standards.

[9]By contrast, I take apathetic and non-partisan citizens who may vote in an election to be passive participants of political competition in electoral democracy, since they do not actively contribute to the success of partisan campaigns by, say, knocking on doors or making financial donations.

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because I assume that most readers of the article will be democratic theorists who hope to address the pathologies identified in previous sections solely through democratic institutions, be they electoral or lottocratic. Hence, only by first demonstrating the inadequacies of those two options can I build a more convincing case for the incorporation of political meritocracy within a democracy–meritocracy hybridity.

The Separation of Powers and Proportional Representation

I want to first consider two institutional arrangements which can be adopted by electoral democracy to reduce the stakes of political competition: the separation of powers and proportional representation (PR). While the former involves dispersing powers across different branches of government and orienting them to check one another, the latter is an electoral rule more often found in parliamentary systems, where the number of legislative seats distributed to each party corresponds closely with the proportion of votes that it has received from the electorate. Both can be understood as means to limit the size of rewards for the winner(s) of political competition. Specifically, under the separation of powers, the winner(s) is expected to gain control over one branch of government at a time and thereby have to always share power with forces occupying others (Hussain 2020, 106). In a similar vein, because PR tends to produce the proliferation of parties, even the largest one is unlikely to obtain an absolute legislative majority. To the extent that it has to then combine votes with other parties to form a cabinet and pass legislations, there exists a co-operative element within the party politics of PR which induces partisans to view each other not only as rivals whom they have to defeat, but also as partners with whom they may collaborate. Indeed, comparative politics scholars have found that one benefit of such cross-party power-sharing arrangements under PR is a 'kinder, gentler' sort of democracy with less partisan animosity (Lijphart 2012, 274; Horne et al. 2023, 318).

But both arrangements also have their weaknesses. For the separation of powers, its effectiveness in moderating the stakes of political competition has been dampened by the rise of modern political parties that are capable of co-ordinating actions across different branches of government. Leaving aside the judiciary, which can be politized via partisan fights over executive nominations and legislative confirmations of justices, there is a fusion of legislative and executive powers under parliamentarianism. Therefore, when partisans compete electorally in a parliamentary system, the stakes remain high because each side aims to win both powers. Even under presidentialism, which formally keeps the executive branch independent from the legislature, the separation of powers has been replaced by the 'separation of parties', which is to say that the two branches will be incentivized to check one another only when they are controlled by different parties (Levinson and Pildes 2006). Hence, when partisans compete electorally in a presidential system, the stakes are not significantly reduced because each side also hopes to gain a more complete control of the government by obtaining, say, the so-called 'trifecta'.

By contrast, although PR can successfully reduce the stakes of political competition among parties, the proliferation of parties also makes it more difficult to form a stable cabinet that can effectively govern a political community (Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018, 131). In response, electoral democracies with PR may resort to either of the following strategies. One is *ex-ante* alliance-grouping, which divides multiple parties into two competing camps before the election so that a clear choice can be made by the electorate between two cabinet alternatives (Ganghof 2015, 74).[10] However, doing so would introduce a winner-takes-all politics back into PR and increase the stakes of political competition felt by each camp. The other is *ex-post* majority construction that relies on post-election bargaining to form a cabinet incorporating parties which can together provide the support or at least non-opposition of the majority in the legislature (Ganghof 2015,

[10]This is also likely to be the situation if PR is combined with a presidential system, as multiple small parties will soon side themselves with either of the two major ones that have a more realistic chance of winning the presidency.

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75). However, such bargaining is often time consuming and can thereby regularly paralyze a country's governance. Moreover, the governing coalition that emerges from this process typically has to satisfy all included parties' idiosyncratic demands, which allows each smaller party to wield disproportionate influence and constantly offload the costs of its pet projects onto the public at large (Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018, 130).

The Lottocratic Alterative

Recent years have witnessed an increase of scholarly interest in lottocratic institutions as a form of democratic innovation that could address certain ills faced by electoral democracy (Fishkin 2018a; Guerrero 2024; Landemore 2020). Those randomly selected bodies usually consist of descriptively representative samples of citizens who gather to deliberate on certain given issues under good conditions and then present their recommendations. Because of their specially designed deliberative processes, recommendations made by lottocratic institutions are often of a higher epistemic quality and represent more refined opinions on particular issues, a point which is recognized even by Confucian meritocrats who are more critical of electoral democracy (Bai 2020, 92). Moreover, given that lottery or sortition is a non-competitive selection mechanism where individuals do not need to struggle against one another in order to obtain the position(s) to be distributed, it may reduce the stakes and narrow the spread of political competition if its recommendations are made somewhat authoritative and integrated into political decision making. In other words, lottocratic institutions can help to moderate a regime's competitive character when they come to share power with electoral ones.

Still, there are debates about what kind of power should be given to lottocratic institutions. Here we may divide existing proposals into two categories: sortition as representation and sortition as anti-corruption (Bagg 2024). The former, advocated by supporters of lottocracy, would grant legislative power directly to lottocratic institutions, which are viewed as a more authentic representation of the mass public (Guerrero 2024; Landemore 2020). Despite its radical ambitions, critics have pointed out that this proposal underestimates the amount of training and time required for ordinary citizens to become competent in the open-ended task of legislation, as well as the dangers of rent-seeking and influence trading that are likely to be present in a legislature by lot (Bagg 2024, 96; Fishkin 2018b, 364–5; Lafont and Urbinati 2024, 111; Landa and Pevnick 2021, 58). By contrast, the latter would entrust lottocratic institutions with more limited supervisory power, where their job is to provide impartial oversights of political procedures that are susceptible to capture and corruption (Bagg 2024, 95). Although such a proposal is more promising in the sense that the task involved is a narrowly circumscribed one requiring less preparation from ordinary citizens and reducing room for elite manipulation, it will also place lottocratic institutions in a secondary position to electoral ones and leave most powerful public offices to be distributed through competitive elections involving society-wide partisan contestation. As a result, they become less able to moderate a regime's competitive character.[11]

Political Meritocracy

Although political meritocracy can be abstractly defined as a regime aiming to 'select and promote leaders with superior ability and virtue', we need a more comprehensive definition of its core institutional features to see its strengths and weaknesses (Bell 2015, 2). I believe that it is worth first taking a look at the meritocratic selection process advocated by some Confucian meritocrats, which includes two phases: (1) the passing of competitive exams that grants one an entry-level governmental position; and (2) further and gradual promotions up the political hierarchy based

[11]This is not to deny that such a limited use of lottocratic institutions is theoretically coherent if one's main purpose is not to moderate political competition but to resist state capture (Bagg 2024).

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on evaluations of one's performance at lower levels of government (Bai 2020, 77; Bell 2015, 169). To make promotions of the latter phase feasible over the long run, offices at each level also need to be term-limited so that there will regularly be available positions at higher levels waiting to be filled by qualified candidates from lower levels (Bell 2015, 116). Finally, although the boundary between bureaucrats and politicians is often being blurred in existing regimes that partially resemble political meritocracy, a practical distinction still exists between their non-leadership cadres whose entire careers are spent as junior or senior clerks within government organizations and their leading cadres who have to move across governing entities, first as ones in charge of local and regional government departments and then as deputy ministers and minsters at the national level (Su and Tao 2024, 27). Hence, for a meritocratic selection process to be suitable for political meritocracy, it has to be applied to the latter group of political officials, who are usually endowed with significant discretionary power (Bell 2015, 4).

With its core institutional features in place, it becomes clear how political meritocracy can both reduce the stakes and narrow the spread of political competition. First, because the meritocratic selection process consists of initial examinations and subsequent promotions, it should be considered as one incorporating multiple rounds of competition taking place over a long period of time, each of which thereby has lower stakes. Even the ultimate winner(s) will only gradually acquire more power. In terms of achieving the objective of political meritocracy, understood as the rule of the wise and virtuous, this prolonged process is also crucial because it ensures that national-level ministers will be ones whose political competence has been built up and thoroughly tested by their rich experiences of holding leadership positions at different levels of government (Bell 2015, 186–7). Second, given that the meritocratic selection process adopts a set of non-electoral mechanisms, it bypasses society-wide partisan contestation involving a larger share of the population.[12] Only aspiring office-seekers constitute its active participants and are pitted against each other.

However, the way in which political meritocracy bypasses society-wide partisan contestation also makes it an opaque institutional arrangement that is liable to elite capture and corruption. In particular, it is unclear how further promotions of political officials should be decided. One common practice is to let officials at higher levels pick out whom to promote from lower levels. But doing so leaves political meritocracy vulnerable to being captured by top-level leaders, who can gradually remove constraints on their rule by placing their proteges at all key positions below them (Bagg 2018, 896; Landa and Pevnick 2025, 153). Another proposal is to decide subsequent promotions through a system of colleague evaluations, 'with 60% of the weighting given to peers and 20% each given to superiors and subordinates' (Bell 2015, 107). Yet, such an arrangement still relies exclusively on human interactions within a small group of officials. Hence, it remains susceptible to factional forms of corruption brought about by the development of patronage networks (Su and Tao 2024, 44). Insofar as either of those scenarios turns out to be the case, the integrity of political meritocracy will also be undermined because the selection process which it uses can no longer be regarded as strictly meritocratic.

Defensible Democratic Meritocracy: A Proposal

While all three sets of institutional arrangements examined in the last section can help to keep political competition within appropriate limits at least under certain conditions, each of them is also either unable to meet those conditions on its own or afflicted with other problems that will negatively impact a political community. The solution, then, is to take a *systemic approach* by properly situating them within a complex political system where they can complement each other to overcome their respective weaknesses and enhance their overall strengths. In this section, I will

[12]The same cannot be said of electoral epistocracy, advocated by Brennan (2016). For how partisanship undermines the promise of electoral epistocracy, see Hannon (2022).

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present my proposal of defensible democratic meritocracy as such a system. Broadly speaking, the hybrid regime I envision will have its meritocratic and democratic components arranged according to (1) and (2), which in turn grants it a range of system-level properties listed in (3):

1. The insertion of *lottocratic institutions* into *political meritocracy*, where they are empowered to decide further promotions of political officials from lower levels and to grant another term to any eligible leaders at the top level.
2. *The separation of powers* between a collectively led executive branch composed of ministers who have successfully undergone the revised meritocratic selection process and a democratically elected legislature adopting PR.
3. The above combination grants the hybrid regime a range of *system-level properties* that are unlikely to be alone possessed by political meritocracy, electoral democracy, or lottocracy, including fair political competition of reduced stakes and limited spread, better communication between meritocratically selected officials and the mass public, a more collaborative mode of party politics, and lightly worn partisanship.

Regarding the meritocratic component that makes up the executive branch of the government, the insertion of lottocratic institutions constitutes a targeted use of those sortition-based bodies along the more promising model of sortition as anti-corruption. The basic assumption is that the opacity of political meritocracy as an institutional arrangement liable to elite capture and corruption can be addressed in the absence of society-wide partisan contestation widening the spread of political competition by taking the power to decide whom to promote out of the hands of higher or peer-level officials and giving it to representative samples of the citizenry (Bitton 2024, 158; Tong 2025, 377). The revised meritocratic selection process then runs as follows. Whenever a number of heads of government organizations at a lower level (for example transportation departments of various municipalities) are near the end of their terms and become eligible to be promoted to a higher-level equivalent (for example the provincial department of transportation) where there is also a vacancy available, a representative sample of randomly selected citizens will be convened, for a short period of time, to review their records in office.[13] After several days of deliberation, those citizens will reach a decision and pick out the candidate to be promoted. For any national-level minister (for example the minister of transportation) who has not yet reached the maximum term limit but wants to serve for a few more years, a separate citizen assembly should be formed to decide whether to grant them another term.

Here, skeptics may doubt whether the revised meritocratic selection process can still be characterized as meritocratic. My answer to this question is that the process retains substantive meritocratic elements first because it has preserved the entire career trajectory through which aspiring office-seekers will have their competence built up and thoroughly tested (Bitton 2024, 158). Hence, national-level ministers will continue to be ones who have passed relevant exams and accumulated proven track records at different levels of government (Bell 2015, 186–7). What the insertion of lottocratic institutions changes is merely the means by which performance evaluations are conducted throughout the process. Yet even such a change can be endorsed on the grounds that it safeguards the integrity of political meritocracy from being eroded by elite capture and corruption (Tong 2025, 378). Moreover, the task assigned to randomly selected citizens by the change is a narrowly circumscribed one that they are competent to execute under good conditions for deliberation, namely, whether a leading executive official has wisely exercised their discretionary power and faithfully performed their statutory duties within their specific domain (for example, transportation) so as to deserve promotion to a higher level or another term at the

[13]To build their domain-specific competence, candidates should be generally barred from switching departments during the promotion phase of the process. Instead, those who want to switch need to apply for a lateral transfer and work up from there.

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top level.[14] By comparison, even under a functioning party system, both average voters in electoral democracy and randomly selected citizens of the enfranchisement lottery advocated by Lopez-Guerra (2014) are confronted with a cognitively more complicated task, one which requires them to simultaneously (1) choose among different legislative programs as presented by different parties (for example, whether to support more infrastructure building and/or healthcare coverage at the expense of increasing taxation and/or national debt); (2) provide an overall judgment of the incumbent's governance records across multiple domains (for example, whether the health minister's success is enough to offset the transportation minister's failures, so that the cabinet can be deemed to have performed well on balance); and (3) decide whether to put the opposition, which is committed to a different set of legislative programs yet whose nominees may also have little governing experience, immediately into the highest national office(s). Finally, given that only leading executive officials are up for evaluations by lottocratic institutions and that evaluations of those at different levels and of different ministries will be conducted by different briefly convened sortition-based bodies, it is also difficult for special-interest groups whose agendas depend on having their preferred candidates placed at all key positions of government to inappropriately influence the entire process. The same, however, cannot be said of the enfranchisement lottery, where a single small set of randomly selected citizens will be empowered to choose the whole government (Lopez-Guerra 2014, 4).

In addition, once lottocratic institutions have been added in the way suggested above, it will activate *mutual communication* between meritocratically selected officials and the mass public. This is because any official who wishes to get promoted to a higher level or another term at the top level will be incentivized to stay closely engaged with the wider population so as to ensure that a representative sample of them will have a positive evaluation of the official when she is up for a promotion or term extension. When it comes to realizing the rule of the wise and virtuous, such mutual communication is also important for three reasons. First, it addresses problems of *epistemic arrogance* and *epistemic avoidance* among meritocratically selected officials, who may, because of their relatively privileged backgrounds, overestimate the reliability of their judgment and fail to properly consider the views of socially disadvantaged groups in decision making (Bell 2015, 125; Ziliotti 2024, 54). Second, it encourages meritocratically selected officials to continuously cultivate public approval for their conduct, so that both their own authority and the perceived legitimacy of the meritocratic component of the hybrid regime cannot be so easily challenged (Bell 2015, 166).[15] Finally, those who successfully become national-level ministers will have been habituated by their prolonged public engagements to be receptive to people's expressed concerns and develop a sympathetic care for them. As a result, they are more likely to be exemplary persons displaying the Confucian virtue of benevolence (Bell 2006, 160; Chan 2014, 91).

In fact, the mutual communication activated by the revised meritocratic selection process will be of a more deliberative and egalitarian kind than the one between representatives and the represented in electoral democracy, which is typically troubled by two kinds of problems, arising respectively from the side of representatives and from the side of the represented. From the side of representatives, because it is more difficult for the mass public to form refined opinions via collective deliberation, elected politicians may find it easier to maintain their popularity by

[14]Unlike legislators who have to set out general objectives of a political community through lawmaking, leading executive officials are supposed to clarify what those objectives entail within a particular context and direct their ministry staff to find the best practical means to attain them. Consequently, even in a modern pluralistic society, they are the type of officials to whom more widely recognized merit-based criteria can be applied.

[15]While Bell (2015) holds that any combination of political meritocracy and electoral democracy at the national level will lead to the former's authority being overshadowed by that of the latter, I am somewhat skeptical about whether this will inevitably be the case during an age of crisis for real-world democracies, when even some democratic theorists (e.g., Landemore 2020) have begun to question the appeals of electoral democracy. Instead, I believe that the mutual communication activated by the use of lottocratic institutions may allow meritocratically selected officials to generate a non-electoral kind of popular legitimacy based on their close engagement with public sentiment.

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resorting to manipulation and plebiscitary rhetoric such as 'pandering' and 'crafted talk' (Chambers 2009, 338; Mansbridge 2003, 519). Yet, the consequence of their doing so is that citizens will become even less informed and reflective about public affairs. From the side of the represented, because unequal voter turnouts and campaign contributions usually overlap with the distribution of other inequalities, different social groups' expressed concerns are not of the same strategic value for politicians who need to obtain electoral success (Pottle 2025, 119). Instead, they are incentivized to pay more attention to testimonies coming from socially advantaged groups, who tend to turn out more and make larger contributions (Pottle 2025, 125). Socially disadvantaged groups will thereby see their views being marginalized in the public discourse, which will further inhibit elected politicians from incorporating their perspectives into decision making (Pottle 2025, 125).

Both of those problems will be substantially mitigated within the mutual communication activated by the revised meritocratic selection process. On the one hand, given that meritocratically selected officials are judged by more refined opinions formed within lottocratic institutions, favorability cultivated initially through manipulation and plebiscitary rhetoric is likely to be subsequently exposed and deemed as negative, which will prevent those who have done so from ever being promoted to higher levels of government and deter others from doing so in their mass-facing communication going forward. With incentives for engaging in manipulation and plebiscitary rhetoric thus reduced, the revised meritocratic selection process can better foster mutual communication based on deliberative rhetoric and mutual education, through which meritocratically selected officials not only gain a better understanding of citizens' interests but also help them to winnow out less informed ideas and become more enlightened (Chambers 2009, 335; Mansbridge 2003, 525). On the other hand, insofar as lottocratic institutions consist of descriptively representative samples of citizens placed under good conditions for deliberation, their internal exchanges will feature more balanced inputs by members of socially advantaged groups and by members of socially disadvantaged groups (Fishkin 2018a, 98). Officeholders whose political futures depend on verdicts of such bodies cannot afford to prioritize views of the former and downplay those of the latter when being contacted by the wider population. Hence, instead of resenting or feeling estranged from the meritocratically selected executive branch that directly exercises state power over them (O'Dwyer 2020, 1148; Wong 2025 206), ordinary citizens could well find their leading officials to be especially willing to engage with different segments of the population in governance.

With respect to the combination of meritocratic and democratic components, my proposal can be characterized as a separation of powers model of democratic meritocracy not only because meritocratic selection and democratic election are used to fill two different branches of government, but also because only one of them, the legislature, is subject to society-wide partisan contestation. The latter arrangement means that interbranch checks and balances which have been diminished by the rise of modern political parties will be restored, as no person or group can expect to simultaneously possess executive and legislative powers. Hence, the stakes of political competition that have been reduced by political meritocracy will be additionally moderated by a fully functioning separation of powers, where winners of electoral competition in the legislature have to always share power with winners of the revised meritocratic selection process in the executive branch.[16] To further illustrate the rationale behind such a model of democratic meritocracy, I want to now explain why I choose to have the legislature to be democratically

[16]I leave out the exact design of interbranch checks and balances because it would vary depending on the sociopolitical context in which the transition to democratic meritocracy takes place. For instance, if the political community that makes the transition was previously an electoral democracy with a long tradition of legislative supremacy, then it is perhaps unrealistic to expect that the meritocratically selected executive branch will have strong veto power. Instead, the executive's checks on the legislature are then more likely to work through a set of advisory and delaying mechanisms. Alternatively, should a non-democratic regime decide to become partially democratic via transitioning into a democratic meritocracy, then the inclusion of an executive veto may be more conceivable.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123425101142 Published online by Cambridge University Press

elected through PR and the executive branch to be collectively led by ministers who have successfully undergone the revised meritocratic selection process.

A meritocratically selected executive branch is normatively more defensible given the ground upon which the branch is now justified in the political theory literature. At least among Western political theorists, the legitimacy of the executive branch was for a long time viewed as derivative, that is, generated by the legislature through delegation or by a popularly elected head of state empowered to nominate candidates for cabinet positions. However, more recent discussions of the matter have begun to challenge the traditional view and appreciate its distinctive contribution to the overall legitimacy of a regime. In particular, they have associated the branch's normative status with 'a legitimacy of efficacy' and 'a legitimacy of impartiality' according to which it is supposed to execute legislation and deliver public goods in a competent and efficient manner, on terms that are detached from party politics and fair to all citizens (Heath 2020, 84; Rosanvallon 2011, 85, 114). Both aspirations of this philosophy of the executive, *efficacy* and *impartiality*, make the branch an appropriate realm to apply the revised meritocratic selection process.

Indeed, I would argue that as far as the legitimacy of the executive branch is concerned, the revised meritocratic selection process may be a superior method for choosing officeholders than democratic election. This is not only because the former is designed to elevate individuals whose competence has been built up and thoroughly tested, but also because the latter is an inherently majoritarian procedure whose limits become especially obvious in the legitimation of the executive. After all, unlike a democratically elected legislature where different views can be made present through the great number and diversity of its members, the top echelon of the executive branch in electoral democracy typically includes far fewer ministers coming exclusively from the governing party or coalition. Hence, it often finds itself struggling between adopting an impartial and general perspective as dictated by a normatively sound philosophy of the executive and appealing to a partisan and electorally majoritarian one from which its power is practically derived (Rosanvallon 2018, 107–8). By contrast, my envisioned meritocratically selected executive branch will be collectively led by ministers whose career trajectories remain largely insulated from party politics, but whose perspectives have been broadened by their rich experiences of engaging with the public at different levels of government. In this regard, it is more likely to govern effectively for the entire political community.

While recognizing the perils of extreme partisanship and the need for the executive branch to be impartial and effective, my proposal does not embrace holism and treat partisan contestation of any sort as fatally divisive (Rosenblum 2008, 62). Instead, it takes partisan contestation to be something that is inevitable for a modern pluralistic society, but which requires careful management via institutional means. This is why a democratically elected legislature is established alongside a meritocratically selected executive branch, so that plurality of values can be respected in lawmaking, and that there exist legitimate venues through which interested parties can get organized and exercise their political agency (Kim 2023, 142–3; Kirshner 2022, 52; Waldron 1999, 7). The practical importance of having such legitimate venues must not be ignored, for the reason that a regime without them can be unstable over the long term, when powerful actors feel compelled to do so in an illegitimate, potentially violent manner (Kirshner 2022, 152). Here, the advantage of having a democratically elected, rather than lottoratic or meritocratically selected, legislature is that it encourages social forces to shape a political community's general objectives via peaceful and relatively transparent means, by mobilizing for and competing in future legislative elections (Landa and Pevnick 2025, 128). PR is chosen as the electoral rule in order to ensure that different views will have a more equal chance to be heard in the legislative process, and that party competition will be balanced by party co-operation in building a legislative majority (Chapman 2024, 167; Urbinati 2006, 40–1). Moreover, since this PR-based legislature no longer needs to select and support a cabinet, no small party will be able to wield disproportionate influence by threatening to withdraw its support for the governing coalition. Instead, different parties can form partnerships on different matters, which further reduces partisan tensions by giving the losers on

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any one issue a better chance of being the winners on another.[17] Such a more collaborative mode of party politics will also promote greater engagement of individuals across partisan lines and be more effective in fostering a kind of *lightly worn partisanship* celebrated in the normative theory of partisanship, one that is not only open to facts and revision but also tolerant or even appreciative of opponents (Muirhead 2014, 17).

I anticipate three further developments from this more collaborative mode of party politics and its cultivation of lightly worn partisanship, all of which will strengthen the stability of my proposal of defensible democratic meritocracy. First, lottocratic institutions that have been inserted into the meritocratic selection process are less likely to be distorted by strong partisan allegiances. As a result, their deliberations can proceed in a more impartial manner and focus primarily on the performances of candidates up for evaluation. Second, democratic elections for the legislature may function more as reliable selection and sanctioning mechanisms. This is because individuals with loosely held partisanship will be able to adopt some critical distance from even their preferred party and not have their electoral choice determined by just the party brand which they affiliate with or align against (Muirhead 2014, 18). Finally, given that the executive branch has been made relatively non-partisan by meritocratic selection and that partisan tensions in the legislature have been reduced by more flexible and frequent interparty collaborations, interbranch relations can be less conflictual under restored interbranch checks and balances. Therefore, not only will oversight powers be less often used for partisan gain, but the executive branch will also have more credibility to suggest certain bills which it hopes to be enacted, as well as asking for a reconsideration of those which it finds problematic for good governance.

Conclusion

In concluding the article, I want to suggest that while my proposal of defensible democratic meritocracy remains compatible with a Confucian justification of the hybrid regime, it can also be embraced, perhaps by historically non-Confucian societies and Western democratic theorists, on pluralistic egalitarian grounds. First, regarding the Confucian justification, Confucian political theory has generally taken an instrumental approach to political institutions, according to which any form of government needs to be justified by its contribution to the people's well-being (Chan 2014, 40; Tan 2004, 142; Ziliotti 2024, 29–34). From this instrumental perspective, the version of democratic meritocracy which I have just presented has immense normative appeal. This is not only because its adoption of hybrid models in institutional designs helps to keep political competition within appropriate limits and avoid pathologies that Confucians would regard as detrimental to individuals' moral well-being and the good governance of a political community, but also because the setup of its executive branch ensures that national-level ministers will be exemplary persons whose competence has been thoroughly tested, and who have been habituated to engage with different segments of the population in a process of mutual education.

Second, as I have hinted in the introduction, one potential strength of a well-designed hybrid regime is that it can be more pluralistically egalitarian by having its different institutions embodying different facets of political equality. My proposal of defensible democratic meritocracy should now be viewed as fitting precisely such a description. After all, besides having a democratically elected legislature, its meritocratic selection process for the executive branch allows for fair political competition of reduced stakes and limited spread among aspiring office-seekers, which creates a plausible pathway for individuals who do not have the qualities of *a good campaigner* to become a political leader (Rosanvallon 2018, 108). The insertion of lottocratic institutions then not only safeguards the integrity of political meritocracy against elite capture and corruption, but also gives all citizens an equal chance to be a major participant who will deliberate

[17]Such partnerships are often impossible in a PR-based electoral democracy, where parties within the governing coalition are typically bound by their agreement not to collaborate with parties outside the coalition on legislative matters.

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about and decide the political futures of leading executive officials. Finally, restored interbranch checks and balances add another layer of constraint on all officeholders within the hybrid regime. In sum, both *access to* and *constraints on* political power have been improved when compared with the situation in electoral democracy.

Acknowledgments. Besides the editor and three anonymous reviewers of *BJPS*, whose constructive criticisms significantly improved the manuscript, I am grateful to Stephen Angle, Ryan Balot, and Joseph Chan for their feedback on an earlier version of the paper. Initial ideas for the paper were presented at a workshop held in the Department of Philosophy (Zhuhai), Sun Yat-Sen University in November 2024. I want to thank the workshop's organizer, Jun-Hyeok Kwak, and its participants, especially Daniel Bell, Wang Pei, and Jin Yutang, for their encouragement of this research. I also want to thank Qi Lingling for inviting me to share some of my thoughts on the relationship between affective polarization and partisan contestation discussed in the paper at a departmental seminar held in the School of Government, Nanjing University, in April 2025.

Financial support. I disclose funding from the National Social Science Fund of China (Grant Number 21CZZ010) for carrying out research activities related to this article.

Competing interests. None.

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Cite this article: Tong Z (2025) Defensible Democratic Meritocracy: A Competition-Based Account. *British Journal of Political Science* 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123425101142

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123425101142 Published online by Cambridge University Press