

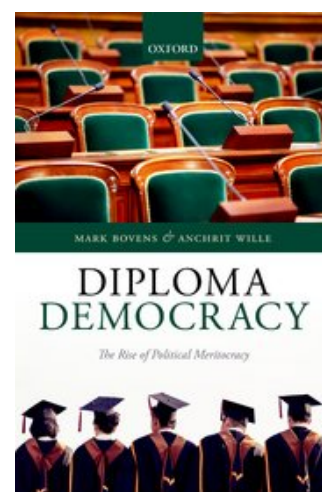
Book Review: Diploma Democracy: The Rise of Political Meritocracy by Mark Bovens and Anchrit Wille

In Diploma Democracy: The Rise of Political Meritocracy, Mark Bovens and Anchrit Wille examine how Western democracies are shaped by educational inequalities that lead to gaps in political participation and governments being dominated by academic elites. While less sure of some of the authors' solutions for these 'diploma democracies', this is a convincing account of the influence of education on political inequality in Western Europe today, writes Jameel Hampton.

Diploma Democracy: The Rise of Political Meritocracy. Mark Bovens and Anchrit Wille. Oxford University Press. 2017.

Find this book: 

What is wrong with having the highest offices of government occupied by academic elites? In the time of Brexit and the '[Rust Belt Brexit](#)', the Donald Trump administration, is this not preferable to handing control of Plato's Ship over to those who see only the shadows on the wall of Plato's Cave? Is this not the fulfilment of John Stuart Mill and Edmund Burke's ideal liberal trustee government, the representative system that more or less dominates 'first world' governance today? After all, our leaders were elected, and in legitimate democracies do we not get the leaders we deserve? What is wrong with government being an education-based meritocracy? *Diploma Democracy: The Rise of Political Meritocracy* answers these questions and many adjacent ones in explaining how and why Western European countries have become 'diploma democracies' and what can be done about it.



Mark Boven and Anchrit Wille's *Diplomademocratie: over de spanning tussen meritocratie en democratie* (2011) examined how the Netherlands became a diploma democracy. This book widens their analysis to cover Western Europe – namely, Belgium, Britain, Denmark, France and Germany – as well as recent challenges including the refugee crises and Brexit. Admitting that their book may be unfashionable in current political studies circles, its purpose is descriptive and, from the beginning, refreshingly polemic:

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 [...] We are not primarily interested in explaining political behaviour or even explaining the rise of political meritocracy [...] We are interested in the macro effects on representative democracy of the dominance of the well-educated (6-7).

The authors' analyses are based on voting and elections, other forms of technological and traditional political participation, the involvement of civil society organisations and the educational stratification of political elites. In their discussion of 'Concepts and Contexts', 'Contours' and 'Consequences', education has turned the countries under examination into two great hostile camps – 'cosmopolitans' and 'nationalists' – and is a major determinant of social and political divides, at least on a par with, if not more powerful than, ethnicity, language, particular regionalisms or religion.



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For concepts and contours, the authors establish that a meritocracy based on education is not a meritocracy. Throughout the study, their *longue durée* analyses contend that educational elitism is a new form of tyranny that has usurped hereditary privilege and wealth:

This dominance of the well-educated in political office is a relatively modern phenomenon. During the nineteenth and a large part of the twentieth century, political elites were formed on the basis of class or property [...] Often they were better educated than the average citizen—the upper classes in general had much better access to education— but this was not the prime source of their political power; that was based on status, land or wealth (112).

Education now guarantees intergenerational social and political immobility and has also failed to wash away the old school tie or popping champagne when one is admitted to the *Grand Écoles*. Top places for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and immigrant families are increasingly difficult to attain today.

The authors usefully identify four concepts of democracy and why meritocracy may or not fulfil them. The dominant form of trustee democracy aside, in a *representative* democracy political bodies should be an accurate microcosm of inclusion. Can the highly educated sufficiently represent citizens with whom they have little contact and little in common? Furthermore, government is far more *responsive* and *accountable* – audit offices, civil servants, courts, insider connections, legislative bodies, ombudsman – to those with higher education and political power. So too then is *legitimacy*, measured as the sum total of the other three, in favour of the highly educated.

The analytical descriptions of the contours of diploma democracies show that education and length of study are both causes of and proxies for ordinary and elite political participation. Education, for the authors, drives civil and political engagement as well as political cognitive capacity, defined as ‘the ability of individuals to gather information on a variety of subjects, organize facts, and efficiently process information’ (84). Well-educated people tend to have better ‘talking skills’: organising and participating in debates, writing letters and emails and chairing and participating in meetings.

The authors also discuss ‘Astroturf participation’ in diploma democracies. NGOs that appear to be ‘grassroots’ are in fact the domain of educated professionals: highly-educated hired guns who have the know-how and connections with the right people to make things happen on behalf of their lower-educated client groups. These people are selected from exclusive ‘pools of democratic democracy’ (108). This is an especial problem in countries like Britain, Denmark and Germany that have strong traditions of formal non-statutory efforts to combat social and economic ills.

For consequences, the simple thesis about diploma democracy is that those with advanced qualifications have more power as they are better represented and, as a result, government will have an empathetic response to their desires and accountability in government will be determined and judged by cosmopolitan standards. The authors also mention the troubling disaffection thesis: citizens with low levels of education will have corresponding low levels of trust in government because they feel excluded and may resort to conventional or violent forms of support for demagogic politicians and parties. Trust for and confidence in government are therefore crucial:

Citizens must have the feeling that they count, that their voices are heard, and that they are able to impact policy. In a diploma democracy the well-educated voice resonates much more strongly at the ballot box; in deliberative sessions and expert meetings; in parliaments and cabinets (156).

Another potential consequence is that the meritocratic class will continue to rule, breed and strengthen its intergenerational tyranny. The authors often appeal to Michael Young's dystopia, *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958), where 'IQ + effort = MERIT', and the future British meritocratic state is overthrown by a rebellion of the less well-educated classes in the year 2034. Indeed, there is a touch of George Orwell here:

The two educational groups hardly meet or mingle. The well-educated live in the university towns, in green pre-war suburbs, or in the nineteenth-century, gentrified parts of the inner cities, whereas the less well-educated can be found in former manufacturing towns, in the post-war satellite cities, or, in the twentieth-century outskirts of major cities. Nor do they mate; educational homogeneity has replaced religious homogeneity (41).

The final chapter offers solutions to mollify diploma democracies. The authors point out that organised labour in the US tends to be good at detecting political talent in their ranks, and if populist parties and other groups allocate representative positions based on race and gender, why not education? Could there be an NGO or a political party run by and for less well-educated people? There are also arguments for compulsory voting, compulsory voting in one's first eligible election and the disaster that would be e-voting. Notwithstanding the rise of an extremist firebrand, the circumvention of representative liberal democracy and the possibility of bizarre and indelible results, referenda and plebiscites are also mentioned—[ask a Canadian how close we came to losing the country in 1995](#). Also suggested is a house of government drawn by a lottery: a 'House of Lots' (179). The best solution is mandatory civic education for all children, which should create persistent rather than periodic engagement with politics as adults and furnish all with the 'talking skills' for the task.

This book is accessible and engaging with chapters often opening with humorous anecdotes. There are a lot of helpful graphs and tables and one does not need a PhD in maths to follow them. Its recommendations aside, this is a convincing book. It fulfils its explicit purposes and, I think, is good for undergraduate and graduate students in primarily English-speaking countries to learn about how and why politics, society and education are markedly different in some of the countries of Western Europe.

Dr Jameel Hampton is the author of [Disability and the Welfare State in Britain: Changes in Perception and Policy, 1948-79](#).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.