

Review of *Democratic Equality* (James Lindley Wilson) for *Political Theory*

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Reviewed Work

Democratic Equality, by James Lindley Wilson. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019, 307pp.

Democratic theory is a highly diverse field, ranging across history, philosophy, critical theory, comparative politics, and law. Nevertheless, democratic theorists typically share an overlapping set of questions. What is the value of competitive elections and other key democratic institutions? How might our democratic ambitions stretch beyond such basic procedures? And what do we do when these democratic demands seem to conflict? James Wilson's *Democratic Equality* aims to address these questions through a novel conception of political equality in terms of "appropriate consideration" of the views of all citizens.

Planted firmly in the tradition of analytic political philosophy, Wilson's arguments reflect the influence of several of the most prominent trends that have shaped that field over the last several decades. One is the turn towards relational egalitarianism, which has only accelerated since Elizabeth Anderson's seminal 1999 essay, "What is the Point of Equality?" Another is the growing adoption of equality—rather than freedom or self-rule—as the core principle of democracy. Though notable contributions from Charles Beitz and Thomas Christiano predate Anderson's essay, indeed, these two currents have recently merged in the influential theories of relational political equality developed by Niko Kolodny and Daniel Viehoff.

In Part I (chapters 1 and 2), Wilson frames his own account in similar terms, drawing from all these authors while noting where his view diverges. Yet as becomes clear in Part II (chapters 3-6) he is also indebted to a third tradition—deliberative democracy—which receives less direct attention in the text. Indeed, it is his greater concern for deliberative processes of collective will-formation that most clearly distinguishes Wilson's view.

To begin with, Wilson argues in chapter 3, equal power in formal institutions such as majoritarian elections is not sufficient for political equality. Against proceduralists like Jeremy Waldron, Wilson claims that political equals must enjoy *continuous* authority over common affairs, not just an occasional vote. Moreover, such views assume that politics can only be a contest of individual wills, as opposed to a genuinely collaborative process of *collective* will-formation. In order to respect people as autonomous beings deserving of political equality, he argues, it is not enough that their votes be counted. Instead, their views and judgments, in all of their complexity, must be given appropriate consideration.

Other critics of equal-power views – including Christiano, Kolodny, and Viehoff – have long raised similar concerns. Often aiming at equal opportunity for influence, the alternatives they propose are concerned not only with formal political rights but also informal resources such as money, information, and time. Yet as Wilson notes, all of these expansive accounts of political equality share one crucial feature with simple majoritarianism: an emphasis on the equal distribution of certain power resources. As such, they still assume that politics is merely a game of power, and thereby fail to demonstrate the proper sort of respect for all citizens.

In Wilson's view, treating people as autonomous beings with equal status requires respecting their judgments *as judgments*, and not just as potential obstacles to be overcome. Their views deserve *qualitative* consideration, in other words, not mere *quantitative* tallying. As he argues in

chapter 4, therefore, the duty citizens owe to one another is not simply to obey the results of any sufficiently fair processes of collective will-formation, but to actively consider the views of their fellow citizens throughout such processes.

This constitutes Wilson's key innovation over prior approaches to relational political equality, and as suggested above, it is also the clearest reflection of the influence of deliberative ideals. By now, nearly everyone acknowledges the democratic importance of public deliberation. Yet many deliberative democrats add a further requirement to widespread calls for greater deliberation. It is not enough for us to go through the motions of deliberation in a strategic or cynical manner, they claim: we must engage our fellow citizens *sincerely*. Although we need not actually change our minds, we must at least enter the deliberative process with an open mind, granting *appropriate consideration* to the views of our opponents.

By rejecting ideals of equal power and influence in favor of an interpretation of political equality in terms of appropriate consideration, Wilson puts a distinctively deliberative spin on recent accounts of the relational egalitarian demands of democracy. On his account, respecting our fellow citizens as social equals requires that we engage sincerely with their judgments before making up our own minds (158). And as he demonstrates, such engagement forestalls a number of worries afflicting other accounts of political equality.

In chapter 5, for instance, Wilson argues that equal-power views face a choice between "trusteeship" models of representation that leave elected officials too much discretion, and "delegation" models that seem to leave them none at all (132). On Wilson's model, by contrast, representatives are allowed *some* discretion, but in using it, they are obligated to continuously consider constituents' views. In chapter 6, similarly, he claims that equal-influence views ignore "the obligations of citizens as listeners" (144) – i.e., to fairly consider the views of their fellow

citizens, without bias or prejudice. Unlike his account, therefore, such equal-influence views cannot distinguish between the sort of legitimate persuasive advantages that might result from talent and effort, and those “shaped by arbitrariness or bias” on the part of listeners (157).

Inevitably, however, Wilson’s emphasis on the fulfillment of ethical duties by representatives and citizens also generates worries of its own. Most obviously, it makes the achievement of democracy dependent upon unobservable mental states. After all, Wilson does not claim that we must be *convinced* by the views of others, only that we *consider* them sincerely. And if we remain unconvinced, our actions may be indistinguishable from those of entirely strategic actors. The presence of political equality thus becomes a matter of private ethical virtue, rather than a public fact about institutions and social structures.

There are many reasons to be skeptical of such an account, but a major one is provided by Christiano himself, whose pioneering case for political equality is founded on the need for equal respect to be publicly recognizable. As Christiano has persuasively argued, it is difficult to see how electoral losers enjoy an equal level of *freedom* or *self-rule* as their victorious opponents. So long as all participants obviously possess the same voting power, by contrast, it is far more plausible to think that the two groups share an equal public *status*. In adopting deliberativists’ emphasis on the internal mental states of participants rather than the publicly verifiable instruments of power and influence, Wilson thus discards a key element of the political equality paradigm.

Indeed, Wilson appears to neglect certain of the motivations behind relational equality as well. One of Anderson’s key objections to “luck egalitarianism” was its focus on largely hypothetical problems, at the expense of the real concerns of egalitarian reformers. And despite drawing from Anderson in other respects, Wilson’s stylized examples can be more reminiscent of her opponents. Though he rightly criticizes advocates of simple majoritarianism for relying on intuitions

generated in small-group settings (89), for instance, his own defense of large-scale democratic practices and institutions also depends on an extended analogy with interpersonal friendship (27-37, 56-67).

Friends may disagree about questions like where to go to dinner, Wilson observes, but they would never settle those disagreements merely by appeal to the will of the stronger (58). Instead, friends treat each other as equals by considering one another's views. Even if none of my friends enjoys classical music, for instance, they would not really be my friends if they failed to consider my penchant for it in group decisions. "This may mean agreeing to go to the symphony together once in a while," he suggests, but it may also mean "taking care to talk seriously about [my] suggestions" or "deferring to [my] more fine-grained suggestions about how to execute a common plan... the broad contours of which [I] did not initially endorse" (58-59). The same obligations, he concludes, apply to equal citizens.

To begin with, we might doubt whether such scrupulous deliberative bookkeeping is really so essential to genuine interpersonal friendship. Regardless of where we come down on this question, however, the attempt to draw inferences for large-scale democratic practices and institutions from this analogy strikes me as even more dubious. Those who lose contentious political battles are unlikely to be mollified by assurances that their opponents have given "appropriate consideration" to their views. Just like those whom luck egalitarians aim to compensate for their unfortunate lot in life, indeed, electoral losers might reasonably interpret such magnanimity as a form of condescension. As anyone who has ever sent angry letters to their representatives can attest, the typical replies sent by well-meaning staffers are seldom very satisfying. Yet who is to say that one's views have not been "considered"?

Perhaps it is appropriate to strive for sincere and reciprocal consideration among close friends. As a political ideal, however, it seems rather naïve. For all its crudeness, equal power is at least a concrete goal to be sought, won, and recognized by all. Indeed, it is no coincidence that real democratic struggles have not usually been organized around demands for “consideration,” but have instead emphasized the sort of concrete power resources provided by suffrage, labor protections, social guarantees, and various other civil and human rights.

To be fair, Wilson does not trust the fate of political equality entirely to private ethical convictions. On the contrary, Part III develops many arguments about which institutions mitigate “deliberative neglect” of certain views, and are thus most conducive to consideration for all. Chapter 7 argues that the unequal voting power reflected in the U.S. Senate and Electoral College does not serve to reduce important sources of deliberative neglect, and is therefore illegitimate. Chapter 8 rejects claims that proportional representation is required for political equality, and chapter 9 criticizes partisan gerrymandering and racial vote dilution for encouraging neglect of certain views. Finally, chapter 10 defends limits on campaign spending as necessary to prevent neglect under conditions of deliberative scarcity, and chapter 11 licenses judicial review wherever it might encourage consideration for neglected views.

Insofar as influential U.S.-based scholars and judges still oppose commonsense electoral reforms, then, Wilson performs an important service in rebutting them—indeed, that seems to be his primary motivation for writing the book (13-14). And his arguments here are quite clever, building systematically upon the foundations laid in Parts I and II. Among democratic theorists, however, his practical aims are hardly controversial. And even if they were somehow achieved, the presence of political equality would still depend partly on unobservable ethical commitments. After all, that is the key distinguishing feature of Wilson’s approach. (One cannot help wondering,

finally, whether his subtle distinctions and technical argumentation will actually persuade anyone who has thus far remained unconvinced by the multitude of evidence that pervasive inequalities threaten democracy.)

Despite these lingering worries – which no theory can entirely escape – Wilson’s book is clearly a significant contribution to ongoing debates in analytic political philosophy. On its own terms, then, it is undoubtedly an impressive achievement. He outlines a distinctive account of the justification and demands of democracy, carefully contrasts his view with others, and systematically draws out its institutional implications. He endorses recent arguments that equal authority over common affairs is an essential component of relations of social equality. Yet he doubts that this can be achieved through equal power or influence. Just as we give appropriate consideration to the judgments of our friends, rather, representatives must grant the same respect to their constituents, and equal citizens to one another. To aid them in this task, Wilson concludes, political institutions must be designed to minimize deliberative neglect.

Nevertheless, readers accustomed to approaching the questions of democratic theory with the tools of history, critical theory, comparative politics, or law may be frustrated by his focus on a rather narrow set of authors and debates. More substantively, they may endorse “appropriate consideration” as a noble aim in the abstract, while doubting its credibility as a broader democratic ideal. Was that really the dream driving historical struggles for democracy? Does it actually explain why our deeply flawed forms of electoral democracy are nevertheless worth defending today? Does it serve as a reliable guide to the dilemmas we face in pursuing deeper democratization? If not, Wilson’s account of the ethics of civic friendship may resolve certain philosophical puzzles, but it leaves at least one question unanswered: what is the *point* of democracy?