

## **Power and Equality**

Why should we care about the equal distribution of political power (or ‘political equality’, for short)? Recently a number of democratic theorists have argued that the most plausible defense of political equality ties it to the intrinsic value of egalitarian relationships. According to these ‘relational egalitarian’ arguments for distributing political power equally, such a distribution is an essential component of certain intrinsically valuable relationships, and required for ours to be a “society of equals.”

The motivation for adopting such a relational egalitarian account of political equality is twofold. First, many citizens of democratic societies accept that there is distinctive value in democratic decision-making, value that does not seem to be exhausted by the quality of the political outcomes democratic procedures may yield and instead rests on democracy’s procedurally egalitarian character. Similarly, many citizens accept that there is distinctive authority associated with democratic decisions, authority that cannot rest on outcome considerations alone, but instead depends on the egalitarian features of democratic decision-making procedures. Yet extant accounts of democracy’s value and authority tend to run into trouble of one sort or another. Relational egalitarian arguments can, by contrast, make sense of our pro-democratic commitments in a reasonably straightforward and coherent way – or so its proponents hope.

Even though I am sympathetic to the relational egalitarian approach to political equality, I believe articulating a fully satisfying version of it is more challenging than has often been recognized. To explain what the challenge consists in, and how we may respond to it, is the purpose of this essay. I begin, in Section 1, by sketching briefly what an account of the value or ideal of political equality should do. Section 2 outlines the basic structure of the relational egalitarian argument for political equality, and highlights a significant ambiguity in it. Two different intuitions underpin relational egalitarian arguments for democracy: that of an egalitarian society, in which everyone has equal status (rather than the kind of unequal status we associate with hierarchical societies governed by, e.g., caste structures); and that of egalitarian relationships, such as friendships or marriages among equals. These two intuitions, though plausibly related, are not neatly aligned. And, I argue in Sections 3 to 6, they have different implications for the distribution of political power: While egalitarian relationships like friendship do include a positive requirement of equal power, the ideal of equal status does not. The latter ideal demands that society not distribute power unequally based on justifications that are incompatible with our fundamental equal moral worth or significance; but it allows for unequal distribution if they are justified in ways that are compatible with, or even presuppose, that fundamental equality. So the relational egalitarian account of the value of political equality must rest, not on equality of status, but on the value of egalitarian relationships like friendship. Yet this comes at a cost: it requires us to explain how political relationships are like friendship, or at least how they bear on recognizable instances of friendship so as to justify the expansion of the egalitarian demands of such relationships to the political domain; and it makes the value of political equality, and the authority of democratic decisions, conditional on the existence of certain attitudes among citizens that would have been irrelevant on the model of equal status.