

What is Meritocracy? A Critical Review of the Meritocracy Literature from a Public Administration Perspective

Meritokrasi Nedir? Meritokrasi Literatürünün Kamu Yönetimi Perspektifinden Eleştirel bir İncelemesi

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Abstract

A literature review on meritocracy might be confusing for researchers since it reveals two clearly different approaches. Meritocracy is often argued with negative connotations in politics, sociology, and educational studies, as it perpetuates and legitimizes existing inequalities rather than curing them. This approach suggests that social mobility through an education-based meritocracy is invalid because wealth and advantages are inevitably passed on to the next generation. However, the public administration literature recognizes meritocracy as essential to good governance. This perspective also acknowledges the importance of merit-based administration in sustaining equality in government employment. Yet, it often overlooks the criticism of meritocracy. This study, based on a critical analysis of the literature, draws attention to the ongoing confusion surrounding meritocracy debates and aims to contribute to the field by examining the literature from a public administration perspective. In this context, the study categorizes meritocracy under the titles "Meritocracy as a social system or an ideology" and "Meritocracy as a form of administration based on merit-based practices (Merit System)", analyzing different perspectives on the subject under these headings.

In order to eliminate the existing confusion, the study suggests declaring that the equivalent of a meritocracy in public administration is a merit system, with dictionary definitions being revised accordingly. The study also recognizes the importance of merit-based administration in public administration and considers criticism of meritocracy to be questionable. The analysis concludes that merit-based administration is primarily relevant to public administration and that the critiques raised against meritocracy do not fully align with the field. The study also argues that the definition of merit as "Intelligence (or talent) + Effort", as presented in the

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criticism of meritocracy, does not apply to public administration. It invites scholars to elaborate on how merit should be defined and measured within the context of public administration.

Keywords: Merit, Meritocracy, Civil Servant, Government Employment, Public Administration

Özet

Meritokrasi kavramına yönelik alanyazın bütüncül olarak incelendiğinde konuyla ilgili iki farklı yaklaşımın öne çıktığı görülecektir. Genellikle siyaset, sosyoloji ve eğitim alanyazınında öne çıkan olumsuz yaklaşıma göre meritokrasi toplumu eğitim ve zekâ seviyelerine göre ayırıştırarak mevcut eşitsizlikleri devam ettirmekte ve meşrulaştırmaktadır. Bahse konu eleştirilerde, kişisel zenginlik ve avantajların sonraki nesillere aktarılıyor olması nedeniyle, eğitime dayalı meritokrasi yoluyla sosyal statü değişiklikleri olacağı tezi de reddedilmektedir. Kamu yönetimi alanyazını ise meritokrasiyi iyi bir devlet yönetimi için gerekli görmektedir. Bu bakış açısı liyakate dayalı yönetimin kamu istihdamında eşitliğin sağlanması açısından önemini de kabul etmektedir. Diğer taraftan kamu yönetimi alanında yapılan çalışmalarda meritokrasiye yöneltilen eleştiriler yeterince değerlendirilmemektedir. Eleştirel literatür analizine dayanan bu çalışma, meritokrasi kavramına yönelik alanyazındaki karışıklığa dikkat çekmekte ve meritokrasi literatürünü kamu yönetimi bakış açısıyla değerlendirmektedir. Bu bağlamda çalışma söz konusu kavramı “sosyal sistem ya da ideoloji olarak meritokrasi” ve “liyakati esas alan uygulamalara dayalı bir yönetim biçimi olarak meritokrasi (Liyakat Sistemi)” başlıkları altında kategorize etmekte ve konuya ilişkin farklı bakış açılarını bu başlıklar altında incelemektedir.

Çalışmanın alanyazındaki mevcut karmaşanın sonlandırılmasına yönelik çözüm önerisi, meritokrasinin kamu yönetimi açısından karşılığının liyakat sistemi olduğunun ilan edilmesi, sözlük tanımlarının da buna göre revize edilmesidir. Çalışma aynı zamanda liyakate dayalı bir yönetimin kamu yönetimi açısından önemini vurgulamakta, bu kapsamda meritokrasiye yöneltilen eleştirileri tartışmalı bulmaktadır. Çalışmada incelenen kaynaklar da liyakate dayalı yönetimin öncelikle kamu yönetimiyle ilgili olduğuna ve meritokrasiye yöneltilen eleştirilerin bu alanla tam olarak örtüşmediğine işaret etmektedir. Çalışma ayrıca, meritokrasi eleştirilerinde “Zekâ (veya yetenek) + Çaba” şeklinde ifade edilen liyakat tanımının kamu yönetimi için geçerli olmadığını savunmakta ve liyakatin kamu yönetimi açısından tanımlanması ve ölçülmesi konularında daha fazla çalışma yapılmasına dair ihtiyaca dikkat çekmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Liyakat, Meritokrasi, Kamu Personeli, Kamu İstihdamı, Kamu Yönetimi

Introduction

Merit is a key value at the heart of public administration. Commitment to public service and the wider public good, integrity in performing duties to the best of one's ability, and performance in pursuit of the agency's mission are strongly associated with merit as a value and an ideal (Ingraham, 2006, p. 493). For this reason, in the United States, for example, one of the accepted principles of the merit system is that "All employees should maintain high standards of integrity, conduct, and concern for the public interest" (The United States Code, 5 § 2301).

To ensure efficiency and effectiveness in the public sector and to deliver public services as required, it is essential to recruit the most capable individuals into public institutions and promote the best among them to senior positions. The exclusion of such individuals from bureaucratic positions undermines government performance. This means that success in public administration depends primarily on the competence of public servants and the best use of this workforce. Scholarly studies also support the argument that a merit-based public administration is indispensable for good governance. A literature review conducted by Oliveira et al. (2024) suggests that numerous studies on the subject indicate a positive effect of core meritocratic practices, such as merit-based recruitment, appointment, advancement, and job security/tenure protection, on government performance.

Merit-based administration requires respect for science, knowledge, evidence, rationality, and professionalism by the government and politicians (Wang, 2021). In this sense, a merit-based public administration is also necessary to mitigate problems arising from politics. One could say that this is one of the main reasons why countries have moved to the merit system. In the United States, for example, the transition was from a spoils system to a merit system (Stahl, 1956, pp. 12-39). One of the justifications for shifting from

patronage to merit was citizens' complaints about the patronage workforce (Johnson & Libecap, 1994, p. 14). This is because patronage was associated with corruption and inefficiency (Johnson & Libecap, 1994, p. 20).

The spoils system, identified with American Senator William Learned Marcy's phrase "to the victor belong the spoils", recognizes that a political party has the right to give government jobs to its supporters, friends, and relatives as a reward for working towards victory and as an incentive to continue working for the party. Whereas political influence was the main factor in determining appointments to federal government posts in the spoils system, one of the main principles of the merit system is the political neutrality of civil servants (Kaufman, 1956, p. 1061).

Turkish civil service practices confirm that a significant part of the problems related to merit can be attributed to politics (Güneyi, 2024, pp. 57-64). This is also evident in the official reports that, for instance, the report of the Special Expertise Commission on the Improvement and Restructuring of Public Administration, prepared for the Eighth Five-Year Development Plan (Turkish State Planning Organization, 2000), includes a special chapter entitled "Reducing the Influence of Politicians on Public Servants". It states that the influence of politicians in the selection, appointment, and promotion of public servants negatively affected the continuity and efficiency of the civil service, as well as public servants' motivation.

Another important reason for implementing the merit system in public administration is to ensure equality in government recruitment. In countries like Türkiye, many citizens view employment in the public sector as a way of getting on the gravy train. They believe that by getting on this train, they will secure the financial and social rights of both themselves and their families. The merit system provides equality

by ensuring that all citizens have equal opportunities for government employment and due protection against favouritism (Kong & Su, 2020). Interestingly, however, many scholarly studies criticize meritocracy for perpetuating and legitimizing inequality. More importantly, these claims are not evaluated from a public administration perspective.

This study argues that the literature on meritocracy discusses the concept from two different perspectives, and neither side of the debate focuses sufficiently on the arguments of the other. In the realms of politics, sociology, and education, meritocracy is generally depicted as a social system or ideological discourse and is often subject to severe criticism. In these debates, meritocracy is, to a large extent, discussed in the context of equality and social mobility. This negative approach argues that meritocracy is not a solution to existing inequalities but rather perpetuates and legitimizes them by segregating society according to levels of education and intelligence. Additionally, critics argue that social mobility through education-based meritocracy is invalid because wealth and advantages are inevitably passed on to the next generation. Nevertheless, these studies ignore the importance of merit-based recruitment and promotion for public administration.

In the literature on public administration, merit is widely accepted as a principle or system that should be applied to ensure effective and efficient management. What is more, merit-based administration is considered essential for achieving equality in government employment. However, these studies do not adequately address the criticism of meritocracy. Furthermore, the literature on public administration neither clarifies whether the terms “merit system” and “meritocracy” are synonymous nor explains how “meritocracy” should be understood in the context of public administration. It should also be emphasized that these two approaches define the term “merit” differently.

This study, based on a critical literature analysis and providing examples from Turkish civil service practices, aims to highlight and evaluate the confusion surrounding meritocracy in the literature from a public administration perspective. Given the importance of merit-based public administration for good governance, the study suggests that a positive approach is more appropriate. However, it also asserts that criticism of meritocracy needs to be assessed from a public administration standpoint.

What is Meritocracy?

Etymological analyses and dictionary definitions typically portray “meritocracy” as a social system in which advancement is based on individual competence and achievement, social mobility is emphasized, and education is highly valued. Yet, as many other scholars (e.g., Littler, 2018, pp. 23-25; Sen, 2000, p. 5) have stated, the term is ambiguous, and dictionary definitions alone are insufficient to eliminate this ambiguity. Sen (2000, p. 5) encapsulated this by stating that “the idea of meritocracy may have many virtues, but clarity is not one of them”.

Within the scope of this study, further issue with dictionary definitions is the vagueness surrounding the level of administration or system to which the term refers. While the Oxford English Dictionary (2001, vol. IX) defines meritocracy as “government by persons selected on the basis of merit in a competitive educational system; a society so governed; a ruling or influential class of educated people”, thus referring to a political or social system, the Free Dictionary uses the term “system” without specifying the level:

“1. A system in which advancement is based on individual ability or achievement.

2. a. A group of leaders or officeholders selected on the basis of individual ability or achievement.

b. Leadership by such a group.”

Besides, Merriam-Webster uses the terms “system”, “organization”, and “society”:

“a system, organization, or society in which people are chosen and moved into positions of success, power, and influence on the basis of their demonstrated abilities and merit.”

The confusion surrounding the concept of meritocracy – even evident in dictionary definitions – is important to realize when analyzing literature on the subject. This ambiguity leaves the role of public administration in the meritocracy debate open to interpretation. It is unclear whether public administration should be embedded within this meritocratic social system, or whether “meritocratic public administration” refers to something distinct. Furthermore, as this study demonstrates, the term “merit” is defined and examined from different perspectives in the literature.

At this point, it should be noted that dictionaries define the term “merit system” separately and do not establish a connection with meritocracy.

Merit system:

“The system of appointing and promoting civil service personnel on the basis of merit rather than political affiliation or loyalty” (The Free Dictionary).

“A system by which appointments and promotions in the civil service are based on competence rather than political favoritism” (Merriam-Webster).

As can be seen, dictionaries tend to define this term as the opposite of the spoils system. Are the concepts of meritocracy and the merit system therefore different from each other?

The answer to this question can be found in the evaluation section that follows the discussion of the relevant issues. The following section first discusses the relationship between meritocracy and education, as this is a significant topic in meritocracy debates. It then compares and evaluates different perspectives on meritocracy and the merit system under the titles “Meritocracy as a social system or an ideology” and “Meritocracy as a form of administration based on merit-based practices (Merit System)”.

The Relationship Between Meritocracy and Education

According to Max Weber’s bureaucratic model (see Weber, 1947, pp. 329-336), education and examination are prominent components of the recruitment process in a meritocratic and rational bureaucracy (Weber, 1947, p. 333). Weber also drew attention to the relationship between democracy and a meritocratic recruitment process based on education and examination. In his view, democracy is ambivalent here. On the positive side, specialized examinations mean, or appear to mean, the selection of qualified people from all social classes rather than the rule of the gentry. On the other hand, democracy is concerned that a merit system and educational credentials may lead to a privileged “caste” (Gerth & Mills, 1946, p. 240). Meritocratic recruitment does not completely level the playing field between social classes, as individuals from privileged backgrounds have greater access to education and therefore a distinct advantage in the competition for jobs.

Some empirical studies provide insights into the relationship between political regimes, education, and meritocracy. To illustrate, Shirali (2019) argues that increasing tertiary enrolment rates in democracies facilitates meritocratization, whereas in autocracies, higher education

enrolment has a negative impact on meritocratization. This is because in autocracies, the ruling elite fears losing their power and the advantages they have gained through networks of nepotism and political patronage. Democratic leaders, on the other hand, prioritize the provision of public goods and value the support of the educated classes to maintain their legitimacy. In one other study, Hollyer (2011) concluded that meritocratic reforms are more likely to be adopted in countries where education is widespread. However, the relationship between education and meritocracy differs when the level of democracy is taken into account. In countries with low democratic participation, education rates strongly influence meritocratic reforms, but this effect diminishes in more democratic countries.

Leaving aside the relationship between political regime and meritocracy, it can be argued that a more educated population would benefit all political regimes by increasing overall competence. But this is only one side of the argument. What we see in the literature is that criticism of meritocracy is often linked to education (e.g., Angus, 1986; Bell, 1972; Goldthorpe, 2003; Jin & Ball, 2020; Tannock, 2008; Themelis, 2008), claiming that the education system legitimizes inequalities in society, such as meritocracy. Although Weber has some reservations about a meritocracy based on education, it would not be wrong to say that scholars have mainly based their analyses on Michael Young's (1958) ideas.

In a meritocratic society, the distribution of social resources and rewards is relied on merit, and educational qualifications are recognized as an indicator of merit. In this system, the role of sorting people according to merit is said to be assigned to education. As a result of increased access to education and the meritocratization of the educational selection process, the best would be determined by education. Education would determine one's position and status in society. Additionally, it is accepted that the principle of equal

opportunities in education gives all citizens, regardless of their social origin, the opportunity to participate in this competition. In this context, social justice and social harmony are ensured by providing equal opportunities in education for those who are disadvantaged by their social background. In this process of elimination and distribution of social status based on education, acquired/achieved rather than ascribed characteristics (such as family origin, race and ethnicity, gender) would come to the fore.

This relationship between education, meritocracy, and changes in social status is explained in the literature by the theory of “education-based meritocracy”. Some scholars refer to this theory as “increasing merit-selection (IMS)” (see Themelis, 2008, p. 433; Brown, 2013, p. 679). According to this theory, there is a relationship between class origins, educational attainment, and class destinations, and this relationship changes over time due to the functional needs of modern societies. The theory argues that in an education-based meritocratic society, the link between individuals’ class origins and their educational attainment weakens over time, while the link between their educational attainment and their eventual class destination strengthens. Therefore, the link between individuals’ class origins and their class destination gradually disappears. So, social mobility increases as we move towards the ideal of an education-based meritocracy. Where this doesn’t happen, it would be for legitimate meritocratic reasons (Goldthorpe, 2003, pp. 234-235). However, as discussed in the next section, many scholars (e.g., Angus, 1986; Brown, 2013; Goldthorpe, 2003; Jin & Ball, 2020; McNamee & Miller, 2009; Tannock, 2008; Themelis, 2008) argue that this theory does not apply in practice.

Meritocracy: a Social System or an Ideology

When viewed positively, the term “meritocracy” refers to a system in which favouritism is avoided, and people are recruited and promoted

based solely on their objective qualifications, such as knowledge, skills, abilities, and level of education. In McNamee & Miller's (2009, p. 2) words, "while 'merit' is a characteristic of individuals, 'meritocracy' is a characteristic of societies as a whole". It is therefore not confined to the public sector. What we see in the critiques of meritocracy (e.g., Bell, 1972; Littler, 2018; Markovits, 2019; McNamee & Miller, 2009; Sandel, 2020; Tannock, 2008; Themelis, 2008; Young, 1958) is that the term is used broadly and criticizes the whole social system. In this sense, it would not be wrong to say that criticism of meritocracy in general characterizes the concept as a social system or an ideology.

One more important point about meritocracy is that when the term was first used, it was not defined as an ideal system. Although the term "meritocracy" was first used by the industrial sociologist Alan Fox in his 1956 article "Class and Equality" for the journal "Socialist Commentary" (see Kynaston, 2013; Littler, 2018, p. 32; Trevisan et al., 2021), it is widely accepted in the literature that the term "meritocracy" was first coined by the British sociologist and politician Michael Young in his book "The Rise of the Meritocracy 1870-2033: An Essay on Education and Equality" (Allen, 2011, p. 367; Civil & Himsworth, 2020, p. 373; McNamee & Miller, 2009, p. 2; Sen, 2000, p. 7; Young, 2001). Although Fox's article made important assessments of the issues debated about meritocracy today, it was Young's book, not Fox's article that gained popularity. It is worth noting that Young's book has been, and continues to be, an important reference point in debates about meritocracy, education, and inequality.

In his satirical and dystopian fable, Young used the term "meritocracy" in a pejorative sense, arguing that meritocracy would only perpetuate inequalities (Allen, 2011, p. 367) and its effects would be negative for the future of society (Themelis, 2008, p. 428). In his book, Young (1958, p. 94), formulated merit as the sum of intelligence and effort. Although Young disagreed and expressed his discomfort (Young, 2001), the term

“meritocracy” was later transformed into a concept describing an ideal system in which not only are individuals rewarded according to their merit, but social mobility is also fairly established (Littler, 2018, p. 43). It has been recognized that true meritocracy and true egalitarianism can be realized if individuals are given equal opportunities based on merit (Celarent, 2009, p. 322). Thus, the literature defining meritocracy as a social system and ideology has been divided into positive and negative perspectives. However, an examination of the literature on the subject reveals that criticism of meritocracy is predominant.

Criticism of meritocracy from the perspective of a social system or an ideology

The metaphor of the “ladder” is often used in publications both in favor of and in criticism of meritocracy (Littler, 2018, pp. 2-3). The positive perspective assumes that the path to advancement in a meritocratic society depends on the deservingness of the individual and that everyone, regardless of their social background, can climb to the upper levels of the social hierarchy by working hard. In such a social structure, individuals are responsible for cultivating their talents through hard work (Littler, 2018, p. 8). In doing so, people then achieve the social positions they deserve by climbing the “ladder of opportunity” established by meritocracy. In this way, changes in social status are achieved in a fair way. Therefore, the ideology of meritocracy emphasizes two main principles: “equality of opportunity” and “social mobility”. However, as discussed below, it is questionable whether meritocracy is fully compatible with these principles.

The main criticism of meritocracy is its relationship to equality. Access to resources for personal development is linked to social and economic status, and some people have limited access to these resources. The advantages of higher income and status are passed on from parents to their children (Bell, 1972; Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu, 1996; Goldthorpe,

2003; Littler, 2018; Markovits, 2019; McNamee & Miller, 2009; Sandel, 2020), making it impossible to achieve a purely meritocratic society (Bell, 1972, p. 42). From this perspective, many scholars (e.g., Bell, 1972; Littler, 2018; Markovits, 2019; McNamee & Miller, 2009; Sandel, 2020; Themelis, 2008) argue that meritocracy actually perpetuates and legitimizes inequality rather than being a solution to it. Themelis (2008) and Littler (2018) see it as an ideological discourse that masks and extends economic and social inequalities and injustices. McNamee & Miller (2009) concluded that meritocracy is harmful (given the United States practice) because it justifies inequalities of power and privilege on the basis of false claims. It offers an incomplete explanation of success and failure, falsely glorifying the rich and unfairly condemning the poor. Markovits (2019) defined meritocracy as a “sham” and argued that it harms both the poor and the rich. On the other hand, it is argued that meritocracy enables people to accept the existing social hierarchy and its competitive nature as inevitable and without alternative. While this acceptance legitimizes existing inequalities, it also weakens the possibility of developing an alternative economic or social formation or understanding.

Meritocracy is often seen as glorifying competitive individualism and supporting a hierarchical system that prioritizes self-interest and leaves some people behind (Angus, 1986; Bell, 1972; Littler, 2018; McNamee & Miller, 2009; Sandel, 2020). This constant competition and focus on self-interest can be socially corrosive and damage the social structures (Littler, 2018, p. 3). Moreover, meritocracy uncritically endorses certain social statuses, without sufficiently discussing why certain professions (such as singers or entrepreneurs) are more prominent or the causes of income inequality (Littler, 2018, pp. 6-7). According to Sandel (2020), meritocracy leads winners to become arrogant and look down on those below them, creating a sense of inferiority in the losers. In a meritocratic society, winners attribute their success to their own talent and hard

work, while failures are seen as the individual's own fault. This view is based on the assumption that everyone has equal opportunities, which is not the case in reality.

Another important issue in discussions of meritocracy is related to the ambiguity of the term "merit". Although merit is commonly defined as "demonstrated ability or achievement", not all abilities and achievements are considered equally meritorious. The determination of merit-based qualifications is linked to the value judgments of society. Moreover, the ranking of individuals according to their merit is a highly politicized act. It is argued that meritocracy tends to favor those who work in line with the ideologies and interests of dominant social groups (Tannock, 2008, p. 445).

In criticism of meritocracy, we see that the education system is declared complicit in the process of legitimizing and reproducing existing inequalities and passing them on to new generations (Angus, 1986, pp. 9-14; Bourdieu, 1996, pp. 116-117; Granfield, 1991, p. 347; McNamee & Miller, 2009, p. 118). Tannock (2008) goes further and describes the current situation as "education-based discrimination". According to Tannock (2008, p. 445), this type of discrimination, which is promoted by meritocratic ideology, tends to overlap with and act as a proxy for other forms of social and political discrimination.

The literature, on the other hand, suggests that the education system itself is insufficient to generate significant social mobility (see Angus, 1986; Bourdieu, 1996; Sundell, 2014; Themelis, 2008). Educational qualifications, as one of the achieved characteristics, are important but not sufficient to secure a better social class position. This is because ascribed characteristics, especially family origin, appear to be a decisive determinant of an individual's class destination (Themelis, 2008, p. 436). However, this does not mean that social status cannot change through education. We see that many children from poor families or

from other disadvantaged social groups have successful educational and professional careers. Nevertheless, critics of meritocracy regard these cases as exceptions that do not ameliorate the inequalities. Moreover, according to Angus (1986, p. 10) and McNamee & Miller (2009, p. 131), examples of individual mobility legitimize both traditional school practices and the social order. In other words, education contributes to a form of social control that perpetuates social and economic inequality under the guise of equal opportunity.

Additionally, the social problems that arise as a result of attempting to climb the meritocratic ladder are a matter of debate. To illustrate, Granfield (1991) argued that working-class students at an elite law school in the United States experience a “class stigma” and that their attempt to cope with this stigma leads to “identity ambivalence”. Similarly, Jin & Ball (2020) concluded that working-class students at China’s elite universities feel disconnected from both their working-class backgrounds and their aspirational middle-class values. This suggests the emergence of a new form of exclusion and distinction, rather than the transcendence of class domination.

It should be noted here that the criticism that meritocracy does not eliminate inequalities and even legitimizes them is mainly of interest to sociologists and educationalists. Although some scholars (e.g., Sherk, 2021) in the field of public administration criticize the merit system, their concerns are not primarily related to the relationship between meritocracy and inequality or social mobility, but rather to the efficiency and effectiveness problem that arises from the rigid implementation of the merit system. The prominent issue in these debates is the comparison of the suitability of guaranteed employment (job security/tenure protection) and at-will employment in terms of public sector.

Meritocracy as a Form of Administration Based on Merit-Based Practices (Merit System)

The studies analyzed in this research suggest that the meaning of “meritocracy” in public administration requires clarification. Given the definition of “merit” in public administration, it would be more accurate to describe an administration based on merit-based practices as a “system”. For instance, the Turkish civil service system accepts “merit” as one of its core principles. According to the Civil Servants Law, “merit” is defined as basing the entry, advancement, promotion, and termination of civil service posts on the merit system, while ensuring that civil servants have security in the implementation of this system with equal opportunities. Meanwhile, “merit” has been defined as a system in American public administration, with determined sub-principles (The United States Code, 5 § 2301). From this perspective, it would be appropriate to use the term “merit system” alongside “merit-based administration”, “merit-based public administration”, or “merit-based public/civil service” when discussing meritocracy in public administration. This is the prevailing trend in the relevant literature (e.g., Hughes, 2003, p. 17; Ingraham, 2006; Oliveira et al., 2024), with the term “merit system” being used more frequently than “meritocracy” in discussions about government organizations. Nonetheless, a detailed analysis reveals that researchers do not dwell on this nuance when discussing merit-based public administration, and that the term “meritocracy”, along with related terms such as “meritocratic recruitment”, is also employed in relation to public administration (e.g., Evans & Rauch, 1999; Meyer-Sahling, Mikkelsen & Schuster et al., 2018; Mulaphong, 2023; Oliveira et al., 2024; Suzuki & Hur, 2022). Furthermore, some studies (e.g., Oliveira et al., 2024) use both “meritocracy” and “merit system” within the same article.

Some studies in the literature (e.g., Andersen, 2018; Cornell & Lapuente, 2014; Evans & Rauch, 1999; Shirali, 2019) discuss meritocracy

in relation to bureaucracy. However, these studies did not analyze the equivalent of meritocracy in public administration. In these studies, the term “merit-based/meritocratic bureaucracy” is used synonymously with the terms “merit system” and “merit-based system/administration/public service”. For example, Andersen (2018) used both “meritocratic bureaucracy” and “meritocratic system” within the same article.

In summary, although it is not explicitly stated, it can be said that, from the perspective of public administration, the term “meritocracy” is used synonymously with the terms “merit system” and “merit-based administration/bureaucracy”. As this confusion in the literature has not yet been resolved, this study also uses these terms interchangeably. The remainder of the study is written from this perspective. However, this study puts forward the importance of merit-based administration in public administration and views the criticism of the term “meritocracy” as questionable.

The Importance of the Merit System/Meritocracy for Public Administration

It could be argued that meritocracy is now widely regarded as one of the most important features of a modern bureaucracy. The following paragraphs provide examples of what meritocracy means for countries from a public administration perspective.

The Northcote-Trevelyan Report (Northcote & Trevelyan, 1854), which is regarded as the founding document of the British civil service, begins with an emphasis on the importance of the merit system. The report states that admission into the civil service should be based solely on merit through open competition. In the same way, the following sentence from the United Kingdom (UK) Civil Service Code summarizes the importance of the principle of merit in the UK’s Civil Service:

“As a civil servant, you are appointed on merit on the basis of fair and open competition and are expected to carry out your role with dedication and a commitment to the Civil Service and its core values: integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality.” (The Civil Service Code, Article 1.1).

In the United States, the spoils system lasted until the passage of the Pendleton Act in 1883, almost a year and a half after President James Abram Garfield was assassinated by a rejected office-seeker. The Pendleton Act, one of the two most important civil service laws in the history of the United States, replaced the spoils system with the merit system by ensuring that selection and promotion were based on merit and that the civil service was non-partisan. This law established the Civil Service Commission to administer the merit system. In Van Riper’s (1958, p. 23) words, the merit system provided a remedy for the corruption and oligarchic tendencies of the combination of business and politics created by the spoils system. In 1978, the Civil Service Reform Act, the second major civil service law in the United States history, introduced new regulations and created new institutions to improve the merit system (Pfiffner & Brook, 2000, p. xi). Today, Chapter 23 of the United States Code carries the title “merit system principles”. Section 2301 of this chapter sets out nine principles for the administration of the federal personnel system. The United States Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB), which is responsible for upholding the merit system, also follows these principles.

The Turkish public personnel system recognizes “merit” as one of its three fundamental principles, alongside “classification” and “career”. Although merit was first introduced within a modern bureaucratic framework under the Reform Edict (Islahat Fermanı) in 1856 (see Güler, 2013, pp. 157–158), archival documents reveal that it played a significant role in appointments throughout many periods of the Ottoman Empire. The principle of merit has been enshrined in every

constitution since the first, the Kânûn-ı Esâsî, in 1876. Article 70 of the current Turkish constitution states that no distinction shall be made in recruitment to the civil service other than the qualifications required for the post.

In 1992, in order to support the public administration reforms of the European Union candidate and neighboring countries, the Support for Improvement in Governance and Management (SIGMA) program was launched jointly by the European Union and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). One of the core areas of the SIGMA has been determined as “public service and human resource management”. A merit-based public service is an important principle of SIGMA human resource management. One of the SIGMA principles states that “the recruitment of public servants is based on merit and equal treatment in all its phases; the criteria for demotion and termination of public servants are explicit”. When we look at SIGMA document “Methodological Framework for the Principles of Public Administration” (OECD, 2019), we see that the perceived level of meritocracy in the public sector is accepted as an indicator of good human resource management.

In addition to OECD documents, many academic studies use the term meritocracy to describe the quality of government. The working papers of the Quality of Government (QoG) Institute at the University of Gothenburg are an example of such studies. For instance, in an empirical study based on public sector employees’ experiences and citizens’ perceptions in 24 European countries, Charron et al. (2015) attempted to measure the level of meritocracy in bureaucracies. Taking meritocracy and meritocratic recruitment as one of the main important features of modern bureaucracy, Sundell (2014) analyzed the surnames of civil servants in the Swedish central public administration to trace nepotism in recruitment. Sundell concluded that the nobility continued to flourish in the Swedish central public administration even after the

meritocratic reforms, due to disproportionate access to education. Additional conclusion was that reforms are unlikely to be implemented if they are not in the interests of the existing elite. In further empirical study, Sundell (2012) attempted to answer the question of which type of recruitment system is better suited to meritocracy. He compared exam-based, centralized, traditional civil service recruitment with a faster and more flexible private sector-style recruitment. In another working paper, Shirali (2019, pp. 3-4) first explained the importance of meritocratic bureaucracy by giving examples from previous studies and then examined the effect of tertiary enrolment on meritocratization.

Beyond QoG working papers, many studies have demonstrated the positive impact of meritocratic practices on government efficiency and effectiveness/regulatory quality/quality of service delivery/public trust and confidence (Brierley, 2021; Cho et al., 2013; Fernandez & Cheema, 2024; Fuenzalida & Riccucci, 2019; Masuku & Jili, 2019; Nistotskaya & Cingolani, 2016; Oliveira et al., 2024; Park & Liang, 2020; Rauch & Evans, 2000; Wang, 2021), economic growth/foreign direct investment/entrepreneurship/favorable fiscal outcome (Bostashvili & Ujhelyi, 2019; Cornell, Knutsen & Teorell, 2020; Evans & Rauch, 1999; Neshkova & Kostadinova, 2012; Nistotskaya & Cingolani, 2016; Oliveira et al., 2024), democratic stability (Cornell & Lapuente, 2014), curbing corruption/preventing patronage (Barrett & Fazekas, 2020; Campbell, 2020; Charron et al., 2017; Cooper, 2022; Dahlström, Lapuente & Teorell, 2012; Meyer-Sahling & Mikkelsen, 2016; Meyer-Sahling, Mikkelsen & Schuster, 2018; Neshkova & Kostadinova, 2012; Nieto-Morales & Ríos, 2022; Oliveira et al., 2024; Oliveros & Schuster, 2018; Rauch & Evans, 2000), whistleblowing/employee voice (Cooper, 2018; 2022; Park & Jeon, 2022), innovation (Lapuente & Suzuki, 2020; Ljunge & Stenkula, 2021), employee competence (Mulaphong, 2023), work motivation (Oliveros & Schuster, 2018), organizational

commitment (Suzuki & Hur, 2020), public service motivation (Meyer-Sahling, Mikkelsen & Schuster, 2021), workplace satisfaction (Kim, Jung & Kim, 2022), and teamwork (Chen & Rainey, 2014). A common standpoint of all these studies is the recognition of meritocracy and merit-based public administration as a necessity for good governance. Overall, the lack of an in-depth discussion of the criticism of meritocracy is also a common feature of these reviews.

Meritocratic/Merit-Based Practices in Public Administration

Drawing on the studies on meritocracy, the core meritocratic practices can be listed as merit-based recruitment, appointment, and promotion (Gerth & Mills, 1946; Hamilton, 2010; Ingraham, 2006; Kong & Su, 2020; Oliveira et al., 2024; Park & Jeon, 2022; Sundell, 2012; Suzuki & Demircioğlu, 2021; Suzuki & Hur, 2022), professionalism/impartiality/neutral competence (Fuenzalida & Riccucci, 2019; Gerth & Mills, 1946, pp. 198-203; Hamilton, 2010; Ingraham, 2006; Oliveira et al., 2024; Rothstein & Teorell, 2008; Suzuki & Demircioğlu, 2021; Suzuki & Hur, 2022; Kaufman, 1956; Kaufman, 1969; Van Riper, 1958), and tenure protection/job security (Evans & Rauch, 1999; Gerth & Mills, 1946, p. 202; Hur & Perry, 2016; Nistotskaya & Cingolani, 2016; Oliveira et al., 2024; Park & Jeon, 2022; Suzuki & Hur, 2022; Van Riper, 1958). More specifically, meritocratic recruitment/appointment/promotion involves competitive examinations (Dahlström, Lapuente & Teorell, 2012; Evans & Rauch, 1999; Gerth & Mills, 1946, p. 240; Ingraham, 2006; Kong & Su, 2020; Oliveira et al., 2024; Sundell, 2012), level of education (Dahlström, Lapuente & Teorell, 2012; Evans & Rauch, 1999; Gerth & Mills, 1946, p. 240; Rauch & Evans, 2000), merit-based reward and competitive salaries (Evans & Rauch, 1999; Dahlström, Lapuente & Teorell, 2012; Oliveira et al., 2024; Park & Jeon, 2022; Rauch & Evans, 2000).

It should be noted here that in some areas, there is no full consensus on which practices are more appropriate for merit-based administration or for good governance. For example, there are some unfavorable assessments of merit-based (performance-related/pay-for-performance) pay systems (e.g., Belardinelli et al., 2023; Choi & Whitford, 2017; George & Van der Wal, 2023; Kellough & Nigro, 2002; Perry, Engbers & Jun, 2009). As discussed by Sundell (2012), the traditional public service recruitment systems based on centralized, formal examinations can be criticized for their rigidity and inflexibility. As mentioned by some scholars (e.g., Bowman & West, 2007; Condrey & Battaglio, 2007; Goodman & French, 2011; Hamilton, 2010; Hur, 2022; Hur & Perry, 2016; 2020; Oliveira et al., 2024; Riphahn, 2004) in the context of job security versus at-will employment, there are opposing views (e.g., Sherk, 2021) arguing that job security is not necessary for a merit-based civil service and that at-will employment is more appropriate for meritocratic governance. Needless to say, there is also a debate about the impartiality of civil servants, with some scholars (e.g., Aberbach & Rockman, 1994; Andersen, 2018; Dickinson & Rudalevige, 2004; Ebinger, Veit & Fromm, 2019; Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2018; Krause, Lewis & Douglas, 2006; Moe, 1985; West, 2005; Yu & Jennings, 2021) discussing “responsive competence” versus “neutral competence”.

The Public-Private Sector Distinction in Meritocracy Debates

As discussed in previous sections of the study, the concepts of merit and meritocracy extend beyond public administration. Therefore, as well as discussing meritocracy as a social system and ideology, it is necessary to evaluate these concepts in terms of the differences between the public and private sectors. The question that arises at this point is whether public administration is different from private sector management. While some scholars argue that such a distinction is unnecessary, others claim that there are significant differences. Taking

into account the ongoing debate on this issue, it is clear that scholars have not yet reached a definitive conclusion (Kenneth & Laurence, 2011; Perry & Rainey, 1988; Rainey, 2014, pp. 53-85). Empirical studies also provide evidence to support both sides of the debate (Boyne, 2002; Rainey & Bozeman, 2000). Without getting too far into these debates, it can be said that there are important differences between public administration and private sector management when it comes to meritocracy. The primary distinctions between the public and private sectors pertain to their objectives, employees, accountability mechanisms, and political issues.

Whereas the main goal of private sector organizations is the maximization of company profits, the overriding aim of the public sector is the provision of general public interest and the common welfare. This difference invariably gives rise to divergent approaches between public and private sector management.

Another important difference between the two sectors relates to employees. Compared to the public sector, the owners of private sector companies have broad powers to hire and fire. This is not the case in the public sector. A fundamental principle of public administration is impartiality, which is upheld by ensuring that public servants are subject to certain safeguards designed to prevent undue influence from being exerted by the administration. These guarantees are considered necessary to protect public employees from unfounded accusations by third parties. However, the effectiveness of these provisions for public sector employees has been questioned on the grounds that they result in lethargy and inefficiency by preventing necessary action against incompetent public personnel. In this case, one of the problems to be solved in terms of merit is the need to strike a balance between the guarantees to be given to public personnel and the sanctions to be applied to incompetent employees (Güneyi, 2021, p. 1064).

As mentioned in the introduction of this study, one reason for introducing a merit-based system to public administration is to promote equality in government employment. At this stage, the recruitment procedures of the civil service, particularly the examinations, are particularly important. Examinations contribute to the merit system in two ways. Firstly, they help to select the most suitable person for the position. Secondly, they enable all citizens to compete on an equal footing for a job in the public sector. Nevertheless, there is some controversy surrounding whether public employees retain their interest in the job after the recruitment process. Thus, one of the challenges of public administration, when considered alongside the rights and protections of public employees, is maintaining their commitment to work throughout their employment.

Weberian bureaucracy acknowledges that civil servants are motivated by the pursuit of higher ideals, such as serving the state or the public interest. But public choice theorists oppose this idea, arguing that bureaucrats, like anyone else, are motivated by their own self-interest rather than the public interest. This is also evident in the case of politicians, whose primary concerns are increasing their electoral support and safeguarding their own interests (Hughes, 2003, p. 11). As the attitudes of public personnel may be influenced by both individual rationality (self-interest) and public-spirited behavior, it can be argued that neither perspective is complete, as they fail to consider the other.

Further important difference between the public and private sectors relates to ownership and accountability (Sundell, 2012, p. 9). The accountability mechanism does not function in the public sector in the same way as in the private sector. This means that an important sanction against favouritism is not effective enough in public administration. On the other hand, as Aktan (2021) points out, the consequences of not applying the merit principle would differ between the public and private sectors. In a competitive market economy, the

fate of companies that do not operate according to the merit principle will be to disappear from the market. In this case, the private entrepreneur using their own capital will pay the price for the mistakes. In other words, departing from the principle of merit will be to one's own detriment. In the public sector, however, if a political entrepreneur who does not use his/her own money or capital favors party supporters, relatives, or acquaintances, the result may only be to lose the next election. From this perspective, according to Aktan (2021), "meritocracy is a problem peculiar to public administration".

The problems that arise as a result of moving away from a meritocracy in government organizations may affect society as a whole. However, differing views on which practices are meritocratic, coupled with the difficulty of measuring "merit" make it difficult to identify a "lack of merit" in public administration. Due to the size of the organizational structure, some non-meritocratic practices may also be overlooked. Additionally, the diagnosis of a "lack of merit" would not be accepted by politicians. In the light of this, the existence of a strong democratic and social structure is particularly important for implementing meritocracy in public administration.

One more difference between the public and private sectors in terms of meritocracy comes from politics. Patronage, as well as nepotism and cronyism, is a vital issue that needs to be combated at all phases of the civil service system. Keeping this in mind, the interaction between politics and bureaucracy is one of the key issues in the debate on merit-based public administration. Theories, such as the principal-agent theory, have been used to explain the relationship between politicians and the bureaucracy. The extent to which politicians should be allowed to appoint public servants, especially senior public officials, is also a matter of debate among scholars. While some argue that elected governments should have full authority to appoint executives, others claim that, to ensure stability in public administration, senior public

official appointments should be made in such a way that they are not affected by political changes.

The New Public Management (NPM) Paradigm Shift in Meritocracy Debates

The principles, theories and philosophies of public administration are subject to constant change and transformation, influenced by various factors such as changes in social and political structures, and technological advances. Within this context, the transition from traditional (classical) public administration to NPM is a significant milestone in the evolution of public administration doctrine. This fact should also be considered in the context of meritocracy debates.

Meritocracy, an essential feature of traditional public administration, emphasizes the recruitment and promotion of civil servants on the basis of merit rather than inheritance or political connections. Examinations and diplomas play a crucial role in determining merit. The training of public personnel is given importance, and it is envisaged that bureaucrats would be highly specialized professionals and would be appointed to managerial positions according to their competence. In parallel with this, a key aspect of Weberian bureaucracy is the belief that public service is a lifelong profession or career (Gerth & Mills, 1946, pp. 198-203; Weber, 1947, p. 334). This notion creates a direct connection between “merit” and “career” systems. It is even argued that the career system is a prerequisite for the merit system and that both systems should be implemented together (Güran, 1980, p. 130).

From the perspective of meritocracy, it can be said that NPM does not neglect the principle of merit, but “performance” rather than “merit” is the dominant principle of the NPM. In Ingraham’s words (2006, p. 488), “competence” and “qualification”, which were the core elements of the early definition of merit, have become thresholds but not the ultimate

measures of success. Performance on the job has become as important as the qualifications required for the job. Yet, performance and merit are not incompatible (Ingraham, 2006, pp. 490-491).

One more important difference between the traditional and NPM perspectives on public personnel management is related to the principle of “career”. In the traditional public administration system, civil servants are the main actors on the stage. Nevertheless, NPM envisages public services to be fulfilled by both private sector organizations and public employees working in different statuses in the public sector. As stated by Osborne and Gaebler (1992, pp. 129-130), while some protection against patronage hiring and firing is necessary, the civil service system should be replaced by a new one in order to meet the needs of the twenty-first century. In this modern personnel system based on broad classifications and pay bands, civil servants’ salaries should be performance-based and in line with market salaries. Recruitment systems should be designed to aggressively recruit the best, allowing managers to hire the most qualified people within legal and affirmative action rules. Wages, promotions and dismissals should be based on performance rather than seniority. Meanwhile, the appeals process for dismissed employees should be streamlined.

Although most governments still implement the main elements of the traditional public administration (Lægreid & Wise, 2015) and despite differences in country practices, NPM reforms have led to remarkable changes in human resource management in the civil service (Boyne, Poole & Jenkins, 1999; Lægreid & Wise, 2015; OECD, 2005). Even though NPM has been criticized and new theories have emerged (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000; Dunleavy et al., 2006; Hood, 1991; Hughes, 2003, pp. 256-282), it has had, and continues to have, a significant impact on the practice of public administration. The erosion of both the uniqueness of public sector employment and the tenure protection of civil servants has been the most striking changes at this

point. A shift away from Weberian bureaucracy and the widespread use of flexible employment has created a problem of inequality. This is because different types of public employees and subcontracted workers perform similar tasks yet have different guarantees and personal rights (Güneyi, 2023).

The crucial question to ask at this point is whether the Weberian or the NPM model of management is more appropriate for a meritocracy. Given that both models have features that can be supported and criticized, the answer to this question would depend on one's point of view. Studies comparing the public and private sectors in terms of meritocracy are not sufficient enough to make generalizations in this regard. However, according to some studies, the needle moves slightly in favor of NPM-style management when assessed on the basis of the perceived level of meritocracy.

In a cross-national empirical study based on citizens' perceptions of the de facto level of meritocracy in public and private organizations, Suzuki & Hur (2022) found that in all countries included in the study, the perceived meritocracy in private organizations is higher than in public organizations. One other important finding of the study was that in countries with a high level of commitment to NPM practices or meritocratic principles, public and private organizations are more similar in their level of perceived meritocracy. When these two findings are evaluated together, it is possible to reach a conclusion that the general public perception is that private sector is more meritocratic. Therefore, applying private sector management techniques to the public sector, as NPM suggests, not only reduces differences between the two sectors, but also makes public administration more meritocratic. But when the details of the study are examined, the situation is not so clear-cut.

In the aforementioned study (Suzuki & Hur, 2022) the NPM variable index was created from the data set of the QoG Expert Survey (Dahlström et al., 2015) according to two statements. The first statement was “The salaries of public sector employees are linked to appraisals of their performance”. The second statement was “Public sector employees strive to be efficient”. It should be noted that, given the issues discussed about NPM, it is somewhat questionable whether these statements are sufficient to determine the level of NPM penetration. In addition to this detail, it is also important to note that the study (Suzuki & Hur, 2022) considered closed bureaucratic structures and bureaucratic professionalism as independent variables and found no significant relationship between Weberian bureaucracy and public-private sector differences in perceived meritocracy.

In an empirical study, Sundell (2012) compared the traditional public service recruitment with the private sector-style recruitment. In the former, candidates are selected through centralized, formal examinations. In this system, examination results are decisive and administrators have little initiative in selecting people. Proponents of NPM criticize this system for its rigidity and lack of flexibility. They argue that private sector-style recruitment, which is faster and more flexible, allows managers to select the most suitable candidates for each position. However, this form of employment is more prone to favouritism. So, it would be reasonable to ask which hiring practice is more conducive to meritocracy. Relying on data from over 100 countries, Sundell concluded that when the risk of patronage is low, private sector-style recruitment can be used to find the best candidates. But when the risk is high, formal public sector style recruitment may be preferred in order to avoid patronage and nepotism. Hence, it should be recognized that there is no “one size fits all” solution, either in recruitment or in any other area of public administration.

Evaluation and Discussion

Table 1 below summarizes the different perspectives on the concept of meritocracy within the scope of the issues discussed in the previous sections.

Table 1: A summary of the different views on the concept of meritocracy

Topics on Meritocracy	Meritocracy as a Social System or an Ideology	Meritocracy as a Form of Administration Based on Merit-Based Practices (Merit System)
Defenders (academic field)	Scholars working in the field of politics, sociology, and education	Scholars working in the field of public administration
Highlighted concepts	Equality of opportunity, social mobility	Government efficiency and effectiveness, equality in government employment, the common good of citizens
General viewpoint	Positive and negative but predominantly negative	Overall positive, with only some minor criticism
Importance for public administration	Not being discussed	Merit-based administration is seen as essential for good governance and equality in government employment
Defining the term "meritocracy"	Social system and ideological discourse	Not clear, but appears to be a synonym for the merit system
Defining the term "merit"	Intelligence + Effort Talent + Effort	A system or principle that is based primarily on personal qualifications and competence
Relationship with the education system	Equality of opportunity is one of the main principles of an education-based meritocracy (positive perspective)	Education is an important pillar of the merit principle/system

Topics on Meritocracy	Meritocracy as a Social System or an Ideology	Meritocracy as a Form of Administration Based on Merit-Based Practices (Merit System)
Relationship with the principle of equality	Both meritocracy and education system perpetuate and legitimizes existing inequalities (negative perspective)	The merit system serves to ensure equality in public sector
Social mobility	Social mobility can be achieved through an education-based meritocracy (positive perspective) The concept of social mobility through an education-based meritocracy is invalid (negative perspective)	out of interest

As the Table 1 clearly portrays, the two main perspectives on meritocracy differ significantly each other. While scholars of politics, sociology, and education tend to discuss meritocracy as a social system and ideology, public administration studies generally define it as synonymous with the merit system. The latter accepts that merit-based administration is essential for government efficiency and effectiveness. An important deficiency in meritocracy debates is the failure of these different perspectives to consider each other's arguments. One more significant shortcoming is the lack of clarity surrounding the equivalent term in public administration.

Likewise, while in the sociology and education literature meritocracy is associated with "equality of opportunity" and "social mobility", in public administration literature merit-based administration is more likely to be linked to efficiency, effectiveness, equality in government employment, and the common good of citizens. Although the approach to the issue is different, equality can be seen as the convergence of these two perspectives. However, social mobility does not appear to be a priority for the public administration. On the other hand, the two approaches differ completely concerning the ideal of equality.

Those with a negative view of meritocracy argue that the idea of social mobility through an education-based meritocracy is invalid and that meritocracy, together with the education system, perpetuates and legitimizes existing inequalities. Nevertheless, a merit-based administration is seen as essential not only for government efficiency and effectiveness but also to ensure equality in government employment and within the civil service. For example, there is widespread recognition in Türkiye that a merit-based administration is necessary to achieve equality. A key problem in the Turkish civil service is that although the principles of merit and equality are enshrined in law, they are not fully implemented on the ground (Güneyi, 2024, pp. 57-64). It is, therefore, unfair to blame meritocracy for the lack of equality.

Criticism of education in meritocracy debates also needs to be substantiated from a public administration perspective. In Türkiye, becoming a public servant depends not on which school one graduates from, but on one's success in the entrance examination. While intelligence and level of education certainly have an impact on success in these exams, it is still possible for those who do not have these attributes to succeed in the exam. Moreover, for some positions, it is sufficient to have completed primary school. Thus, the public sector in Türkiye does not exclusively employ the most intelligent people or those who have graduated from the best schools. It is also unclear whether those with these qualifications would prefer to work in the public or private sector. Furthermore, there is no evidence of discrimination against poor children attending schools with rich children in Türkiye. Therefore, from the perspective of the Turkish civil service, the claim that "education is an instrument of discrimination" needs to be supported by evidence.

Additionally, the criticism that the wealthy inevitably pass on their advantages to their children, thereby making social mobility

impossible, is questionable from the perspective of Turkish civil service practice. The problem in Türkiye is not access to higher education, but finding a good job after graduation. In this sense, it cannot be said that only the children of rich families can enroll at a prestigious university. Students who perform well in the university entrance examination can attend a good public university or study for free at a preferred private university. The Turkish media often celebrate the success stories of students from poor families who do well in these exams. Thus, the claim that social mobility does not work needs to be confirmed.

This study highlights that the term “merit” is defined and discussed differently in the literature on politics, sociology, education, and public administration. By evaluating the merit-related issues and their implementation in the civil service, it can be concluded that the definition of merit as “IQ (intelligence) + effort” does not apply to public administration. From a public administration perspective, the prominent components of the merit principle can be listed as qualification, competence, performance, and experience. Although “IQ” in Young’s definition of merit is important for an individual’s competence, it is not the only factor in this regard. Effort, on the other hand, can be linked to performance.

Qualification refers to the basic requirements for government employment. One such requirement is education. Certificates required for the job and background checks, such as criminal record checks and medical examinations, can also be included in the qualification category.

Competence is a broad term encompassing a range of skills needed to do one’s job effectively. In addition to the core competencies, management skills such as agility, communication, decision making, problem solving, staff motivation, change management, innovation, specialized coordination and collaboration skills, and inter-agency

networking can also be considered as new competencies to enhance the merit of public servants, especially senior public officials (NAPA, 2002, pp. 41-42). The term “talent”, which some scholars use as a component of merit, can also be considered in conjunction with competence. The competence of those recruited into the civil service is mainly determined by written, oral, and practical examinations and interviews. The problem of the Turkish civil service in this respect is the move away from placement through centralized examinations and the use of oral examinations and interviews for favouritism. Another prominent problem is that centrally administered written examinations cannot perfectly determine an individual’s aptitude for the job. However, they do make an important contribution to the merit system in terms of preventing favouritism by ensuring that all candidates compete on a level playing field (Güneyi, 2021, pp. 1065-1074).

Given the paradigm shift in the NPM approach, performance should also be considered an important component of merit. As discussed in the “NPM paradigm shift in meritocracy debates” section of the study, “performance” has been added to “competence” and “qualification” as one of the main elements of the definition of merit.

The fourth pillar of merit is “experience”. In the context of public administration and the principle of merit, experience can be defined as the accumulated knowledge that enables a person to perform their duties properly. It also means that the public servants should have sufficient knowledge of the organization in which they work. Experience is, therefore, particularly important for public servants in managerial positions. This creates a link between merit and career principles. It is even argued that these two principles should definitely be implemented together.

It is important to note that although these four attributes are fundamental, limiting merit to them would be inappropriate due to the

different perspectives on its definition. Alternative approaches advocate including additional components when defining merit, such as adherence to ethical principles, patriotism, integrity, and impartiality. The tension between merit components is also a subject of debate. For instance, some argue that prioritizing experience (i.e. seniority or length of service) in appointments and promotions prevents considering actual success and performance. These differing views make it difficult to define the principles of merit with absolute certainty. How merit can be measured is also an issue. Therefore, the question of how merit should be defined and measured in public administration requires more attention from scholars.

Following these discussions, if we return to the question of what meritocracy is, we should begin by noting that the prevailing view in literature and dictionary definitions is that meritocracy is a social system. According to this study, this is mainly because meritocracy continues to be discussed in relation to Young's (1958) arguments. Indeed, when the literature on the subject is analyzed, it becomes apparent that many authors have repeated Young's theses. However, this approach overlooks the importance of the issue in terms of public administration. Conversely, from this perspective, it is unclear whether the term "meritocracy" refers only to a social system or to any organization based on merit.

In public administration literature, two shortcomings stand out. Firstly, criticism of meritocracy is not adequately discussed from a public administration perspective. Secondly, the counterpart of meritocracy in public administration remains unclear.

Based on dictionary definitions, one could argue that meritocracy is a social system that includes public administration. However, this study clearly demonstrates that the defining features of a meritocratic social system do not apply to public administration. Moreover, the literature

on politics, sociology, education, and public administration approaches the issue from a completely different point of view. It can be argued that dictionary definitions have been shaped by Young's arguments, preventing the importance of merit in public administration from being reflected in these definitions.

As discussed in the section on dictionary definitions, the terms "meritocracy" and "merit system" are defined differently and are not referenced in relation to each other. Therefore, it could be argued that meritocracy and the merit system are two distinct concepts that should be discussed separately. However, the fact that "merit" lies at the center of both concepts and is defined differently makes this analysis problematic.

To eliminate the current confusion, this study suggests declaring the term "merit system" synonymous with "meritocracy" in the context of public administration and amending the dictionary definitions accordingly. Additionally, each perspective should consider and discuss the arguments of the other.

This study also argues that, if we define the "merit system" as a set of practices based on merit, describing it as simply the opposite of the spoils system in a dictionary is inadequate. This is because, in addition to political favouritism, other forms of favouritism, such as nepotism and cronyism, also need to be combated to ensure government efficiency and equality in the public sector. Conversely, the principle of merit can be defined more broadly as the set of rules and practices necessary for establishing an effective and efficient personnel system (Güneyi, 2021, p. 1057).

Conclusion

Since it was first used by sociologists Alan Fox (1956) and Michael Young (1958), the term "meritocracy" has had a negative connotation. Although the term was later transformed into a positive concept, many

scholars have followed the assertions of these sociologists, particularly Young's. All of these scholars argued that meritocracy does not solve existing inequalities but rather perpetuates and legitimizes them. The ideas of "opportunity ladder", "level playing field", and "social mobility" have been criticized for their ineffectiveness. Education, as an essential element of meritocracy, has also been accused of perpetuating this flawed system. Scholars working in the field of education have echoed the sociologists' arguments, stating that the theory of "education-based meritocracy" functions as "education-based discrimination".

Unlike in politics, sociology, and education, merit is widely accepted as an important principle or system in public administration literature. Although the term "merit system" is more commonly used, the sources analyzed in this study show that "meritocracy", "merit system", and "merit-based administration/bureaucracy" are generally considered to be synonymous. However, this study argues that the question of what the equivalent of meritocracy is in public administration has not been discussed enough by public administration scholars. From this perspective, the study confirms the ambiguity of the concept of meritocracy as expressed in the literature from a public administration standpoint.

This study supports the view that the assertion that meritocracy characterizes a social system encompassing public administration cannot eliminate the ambiguity surrounding the concept of meritocracy. This is because, as analyzed in the study, the defining features of a meritocratic social system do not align with public administration. Moreover, the literature on politics, sociology, education, and public administration approaches the issue from a completely different point of view. Since "merit" lies at the very heart of both concepts, it is equally illogical to claim that meritocracy and the merit system are two distinct concepts to be considered separately.

In order to help eliminate the current confusion over the concept of meritocracy, the study suggests declaring the term “merit system” to be synonymous with “meritocracy” in the context of public administration. However, each perspective should also consider and discuss the arguments of the other. Perhaps different approaches to meritocracy debates may converge by the end of these discussions.

This study also reveals that, as with the concept of meritocracy, the concept of merit is described and discussed from various perspectives in the literature. By evaluating the merit-related issues and their implementation in the civil service, the study concludes that the definition of merit as “intelligence (or talent) + effort” does not apply to public administration. Furthermore, it argues that the definition and measurement of merit in public administration require further elaboration from scholars.

The study also emphasizes that, as in the literature, dictionary definitions are generally shaped by a perspective that views meritocracy as a social system or an ideology. However, in this case, the importance of merit in public administration has not been reflected in dictionary definitions. Conversely, dictionaries often define the merit system merely as the opposite of the spoils system. When the issues discussed under the heading “merit system” are analyzed, this approach also falls short. Therefore, not only should the dictionary definition of “meritocracy” be revised, but also that of “merit system”.

It is defended in this study that there are significant differences between the public and private sectors with regard to the principle of merit, and that the merit-related issues are more specific to the public sector. However, the merit system is valid not only for public administration, but also for the private sector. Given the ongoing debate surrounding the terms “administration” and “management”,

“merit-based management” could be used as an alternative to “merit system” and “merit-based administration” in the private sector.

Last but not least, the issue that especially should be emphasized within the scope of this study is the importance of merit-based administration for the quality of government and the common good of citizens. From this perspective, the claim that meritocracy perpetuates and legitimizes existing inequalities is unfair. In general, meritocracy in public administration involves recruiting and appointing the person best suited to the job. This cannot be a claim of inequality for others. As meritocratic public administration aims to achieve efficiency, effectiveness, and equity, meritocracy in public administration should be viewed from a positive perspective. While it cannot solve all equality-related problems, meritocracy is not the cause of these problems. Given that a perfect meritocratic administration is very difficult to achieve, full meritocracy, like full equality, can be seen as a utopia. Yet, it would be unfair to describe meritocracy as a dystopia. Perhaps the causes of social inequality should be sought elsewhere than meritocracy. Alternatively, we could discuss whether true equality is possible through George Orwell’s allegory, *Animal Farm*.

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AUTHOR STATEMENT

Research and Publication Ethics Statement

This study has been prepared in accordance with the principles of scientific research and publication ethics.

Ethics Committee Approval

This research does not require Ethics Committee Approval.

Author Contributions

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Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest among the authors or in terms of third parties.