

**Review of**  
***Representative Democracy: A Justification***

Dimitri Landa and Ryan Pevnick  
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This ambitious and enjoyable book argues that despite substantial egalitarian defects, representative democracy – or *electoral democracy*, as I will call it – is at least as good at protecting equality as its main alternatives. It is also better at ensuring social peace and epistemically decent government (5–6). *Representative Democracy*, like other works anxiously assessing the relative merits of electoral democracy, is driven by contemporary concerns which affect the characterization of electoral democracy, the selection of alternatives, and the strategies of comparison. Its focus on the accountability of officials and the epistemic properties of government reflects the damage caused by recent scholarship and events to conventional beliefs about electoral democracy. This review provides a sympathetic, though not uncritical, overview of the argument, concentrating on its implications for electoral democracy and equality.

The book starts with a stipulative and spare definition of electoral democracy based on two features:

1. Those who govern are selected, directly or indirectly, by the citizenry in competitive elections set at regular intervals.
2. In the interim between elections, elected officials enjoy significant leeway to rule as they like. (3–4)

Lottocracy, which is a form of *non-electoral representative democracy* according to its proponents, is characterized by:

1. Governing officials are selected randomly or appointed by those who are.
2. Selected officials are free to rule as they like in the periods between selections into office. (48).

The comparison between electoral democracy and lottocracy (as well as with direct democracy and meritocracy, which I will generally ignore) is based on three variables: equality, social peace/stability, and epistemic merit (40). It is unclear why

these points of comparison are preferred to ones typical of global comparisons of democratic and undemocratic governments, which include such things as infant and maternal mortality, literacy, prosperity and the protection of basic rights. Still, as Landa and Pevnick claim, social peace is plausibly a desideratum of good government (39); equality is “fundamental” (36); and “epistemic merit” can be judged in terms of the ability “to generate attractive policy choices by improving information and beliefs among the relevant decision makers” (40).

### **I. Equal Opportunity for Political Influence**

So, how should we think about equality for the purposes of regime comparison? The answer proposed by Landa and Pevnick is “equal opportunity for political influence,” because it is “a central component of any attractive conception of political equality,” but, unlike the more demanding equal political power, it “respects the choices that people make about their own lives and priorities” and seems consistent with at least minimally attractive collective outcomes (37–8). They note that “equal opportunity for political influence is widely appealed to in the democratic theory literature, both by those who defend traditional forms of democratic governance” and those who favor lottocratic and more participatory alternatives (38). The deeper philosophical claims about equality and their bearing on the comparison of electoral democracy and lottocracy are found in chapters 4 and 5.

In characteristic and appealing fashion, Landa and Pevnick anticipate the details of their argument and lay them out in a short number of points. Thus,

1. we have “strong reasons” to want to be treated as equal members of our political community;
2. a necessary condition for such treatment is that opportunities to exercise political influence are “equally distributed in an ongoing fashion”;
3. such a distribution of opportunities requires democratic government;
4. hence “only democratic government can be justified,” given 1 (59).

According to Landa and Pevnick, electoral democracy must fall short of satisfying equal opportunity for political influence, because it cannot provide equal *ongoing* opportunities for political influence. The problem is not that electoral democracy, like lottocracy, distinguishes representatives with decision-making power from everyone else. If elected officials “reliably act just as a majority of their constituents prefer,” vertically unequal power “need not be problematic” (63) – though by implication, it might be. Rather, failures of equal opportunity for political influence arise from “the informational asymmetry between voters and officeholders” (64). These vertical inequalities are compounded by horizontal ones which include, but are not reducible to, unequal wealth. What we might call “Olsonian inequalities” in opportunities for collective action – based on the size, heterogeneity and dispersion

of group members – would generate unjustified inequalities in *access* to office, and *influence* on those who hold it, even if wealth were equal (M. Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action* [Cambridge, MA. Harvard University Press, 1971] (65–6). Hence, according to Landa and Pevnick, electoral democracy has serious limitations if you care about equality. They conclude: “our discussion rules out the most obvious ways to account for the supposed egalitarian advantage of representative democracy – including appeals to the importance of equal political power, the importance of equal opportunity for political power, the responsiveness of public officials to ordinary citizens, the fairness of one person–one vote in the light of substantive policy disagreement, and so forth” (92).

Should we prefer lottocracy to electoral democracy, then? Landa and Pevnick reject that suggestion. Sortition “promises to give all citizens equal chances to hold important political office” (95). “By their very construction, sortition-based systems promise representative bodies that come very close to mirroring the broader society and giving all citizens equal chances to govern” (96). So far, so good. Unfortunately, while lottocracy is better than electoral democracy in terms of equal *access* to office, Landa and Pevnick claim that it is poor, and less good, at securing *continuing* equal opportunities for political influence. This claim is counterintuitive, because random selection makes it difficult for partisan interests to capture representatives. We might therefore expect lottocratic political outcomes to be responsive to citizens’ interests. Nonetheless, Landa and Pevnick maintain, lottocracy is vulnerable to the horizontal inequalities of wealth and organizational ability that adversely affect electoral democracy (98). In the absence of electoral checks on rent-seeking (98), the wealthy are likely to have a disproportionate influence on public policy via their disproportionate influence on public opinion (99, 101–5).

According to Landa and Pevnick, the combination of elections and official discretion between elections means that electoral democracies fail to secure equal opportunity for political influence. However, getting rid of elections without removing official discretion, as in lottocracy, *also* threatens equal opportunity for political influence (94). Removing discretion but keeping elections makes it difficult for representatives to withstand inegalitarian influences (94). Hence, *Representative Democracy’s* striking claim is that the very features of electoral democracy that lead to unequal opportunities for political influence *counteract* each other in ways that make it *better* at ensuring equal opportunity for political influence than lottocracy and, even, than some forms of direct democracy. Compounding the paradoxical aspects of the argument, Landa and Pevnick conclude that if governments in undemocratic but meritocratic regimes are sufficiently fearful of violent overthrow, they may be motivated to support meritocracy (and good government) in other offices. If so, they

might be better even than electoral democracy, (let alone lottocracy and direct democracy), in securing equal opportunity for political influence. (85, 91–2).

Landa and Pevnick’s arguments are lively, original and provocative. However, they can be puzzling. If “well-designed” versions of regimes are necessary to test their merits

(30–1), shouldn’t we expect electoral democracies and lottocracies to identify, mitigate, and compensate for predictable Olsonian and wealth inequalities? (See, for example, J. Cohen and J. Rogers, *Associations and Democracy* [London, UK. Verso, 1995]). Given their other egalitarian features, wouldn’t they then be better than meritocracy at securing equal opportunity for political influence? Background inequalities are less likely to be cumulative and easier to contain in lottocracy than in electoral democracy, because representatives cannot be known in advance and are unlikely to be re-selected. So, couldn’t lottocracy be better than electoral democracy at securing *ongoing* equality of opportunity for political influence *despite* being inferior in terms of accountability? Lottocracy involves no *regime-specific* form of accountability, because sortition is a device for *selecting*, not disciplining or judging, officials. Elections, however, are weak accountability devices. Electoral democracies therefore tend to rely on administrative, legal, and political forms of oversight which are not exclusive to them, but common to other regimes. Lottocracies might use these too; so why must electoral democracy be better than lottocracy at securing continuing equal opportunity for political influence?

Conversely, unless we take lottocratic claims at face value (95–6), electoral democracy may not be worse than lottocracy at securing equal opportunity to *access* political office. Landa and Pevnick believe that *electoral* accountability marks the critical difference between electoral democracy and lottocracy. However, the egalitarian differences between electoral and nonelectoral accountability are uncertain and with them, the relevance of *accountability* to the case for electoral democracy. In any case, elections only promote accountability because they *select* office holders, and *electoral* selection may have egalitarian advantages over lottocracy, independent of its consequences for accountability. So, is lottocracy better than electoral democracy at securing equal opportunities to access office, as Landa and Pevnick suggest? If not, what happens to their comparison between these regimes?

## II. Equality, Selection and Accountability

An equal chance to be randomly selected for office is consistent with highly unequal opportunities to hold it. That is the reason why lottocrats tend to favor weighted over unweighted selection, because the members of socially disadvantaged groups are less likely to serve, if selected, than the more advantaged. Weighted selection,

however, is incompatible with equal chances to be selected to office, and means deciding *which* groups ought to have greater randomized chances for political influence than others. Hence Guerrero's preference for unweighted sortition (Alexander Guerrero, *Lottocracy: Democracy Without Elections* [Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2024, 106–7, 390–1]). But unweighted sortition may be no better than election at securing equal opportunities for political influence based on descriptive similarities between representatives and represented (compare 96). In a large, diverse population, there is no chance of creating a descriptively representative legislative body, and just as a coin toss may turn up heads on multiple occasions before producing a run of tails, unweighted randomization might repeatedly select a legislature with almost no women, before selecting one with almost no men. It is unclear, then, that lottocracy secures equal access to office, or does so better than elections, even if we abstract away from willingness and ability to serve. As sortition-based departures from descriptive representation mean that vertical inequalities of power cannot be justified by the supposed similarity of interests and outlook of representatives and represented, the egalitarian advantages of lottocracy over electoral democracy look more apparent than real.

Given their chosen metric of equality, it is puzzling why Landa and Pevnick believe that (unweighted) sortition is superior to (unweighted) election (37–8). Random selection can be a fair way to distribute a scarce good amongst those who want and are equally entitled to it. *Ex hypothesi*, office is a scarce good, relative to those who want it – although some people do *not* want it. So why should an egalitarian ensure that everyone has the same chance at office, *whether they want it or not*? What is fair about that? Not using my *opportunity* to serve does not decrease, and may increase, yours. Equalizing our *probability* of being selected, however, will affect your chance to serve *whether I serve, if selected, or not*. Lottocracy may therefore decrease the selection opportunities of those who are willing/keen to serve, without enhancing the desire or ability to serve of those who are selected. This might have an egalitarian justification if people were forced to serve if selected, but lottocrats are not keen to go down that path – nor would that be consistent with Landa and Pevnick's reasons for selecting equal *opportunity* for political influence as the metric for regime comparisons. In short, lottocracy appears to confuse our shared interest in *equal membership* in our polity (58) with shared interests in *holding office* and equal chances to be selected to it.

Electoral democracy gives us the right/opportunity to select others to office, even if we do not seek it ourselves. In a lottocracy, we may have the opportunity to refuse to serve but cannot nominate others in our place. If we want to run for office, we cannot increase our chances of gaining it. Lottocracy therefore means that our chance of being governed by a team that we unanimously support is no greater than that of a

team we unanimously oppose. None of this seems especially democratic, or consistent with the idea that people should be able to shape their life together as peers. Finally, electoral democracy means that people are not forced to trade off their rights to support others, because they want to run for office themselves – though some forms of representation might require that. Hence, it avoids zero-sum conflicts of interest while affirming the political equality of electoral losers and winners – even though the latter will have rights/opportunities that the former lack.

Such considerations play no role in the egalitarian case for electoral democracy developed by Landa and Pevnick. Granted, they have no obvious bearing on *accountability*, although they may be relevant to the epistemic quality and stability of electoral democracy, nonetheless. They probably play a role in the egalitarian attractions of electoral democracy as compared to direct democracy too, given that lack of time and burdensome care obligations may make a right to vote for representatives more important to equality, as well as stability and good government, than a right directly to vote on policies. Electoral democracy means that people have unequal chances for office. Nonetheless, Landa and Pevnick seem to have understated the advantages of electoral democracy for equality and overstated its disadvantages.

Why has this happened? The answer seems to lie in their characterization of electoral democracy, on the one hand, and of equality as a comparative variable, on the other. The two features of electoral democracy, stipulated by Landa and Pevnick (3–4), say nothing about people’s rights/opportunities *for office*. Hence, they fail to distinguish electoral democracy from undemocratic electoral regimes. Moreover, their characterization of electoral democracy abstracts from the relationship between people’s claims *on office* and their claims *to select* office holders – in particular, that the one cannot be traded for the other. Both are essential to electoral democracy and, unlike popular sovereignty, distinguish it from direct democracy as well as other regimes (4).

The second, though related, problem is that Landa and Pevnick treat people’s claims on office as a corollary of equal opportunity for political influence, rather than intrinsic to electoral democracy *whatever our views of equality or democracy*. They claim that equal opportunity for political influence requires “a fair chance to access desirable positions or privileges” (60); hence that it requires:

1. Formal equality of opportunity for political influence, such that there are no legal exclusions on competing for high office;
2. “the allocation of such positions must track relevant qualifications in an unbiased manner (weak substantive EOPI [equality of opportunity for political influence]); and

3. “citizens’ chances in such competition should depend on their talent and willingness to work (rather than, say, their family background) (strong substantive EOPI).” (74)

Their interpretation of equal opportunity for political influence adapts a Rawlsian standard of fair equality of opportunity for jobs, rather than Rawls’ requirement that political liberties have fair value, implying that access to legislative office should be judged as though it were any other position of power and responsibility – which is doubtful. Then, assuming that democrats are committed to equality, Landa and Pevnick read their assumptions about equality of opportunity for political influence into the ways that a well-functioning electoral democracy promotes equality, stability and good government.

But equality as a *metric* for comparing regimes may not be the same as the equality *constitutive* of a given regime. Electoral democracy requires citizens to have equal opportunities to compete for office and to vote, whether one values equal opportunity for political influence, or interprets as do Landa and Pevnick. That is part of what makes it electoral *democracy*. What those opportunities involve is a complicated question, because the opportunities we have as voters will affect our opportunities as candidates, and vice versa. Appeals to equal opportunity for political influence might enable us to decide such questions, or to set the constitutive rules of electoral democracy – although that seems unlikely. *Influence* is too generic a term to capture the democratic concerns with equality (and liberty) that make *election* a requirement for *legislative* office, though not for other political offices. Hence, Landa and Pevnick’s characterization of electoral democracy, in conjunction with their metric of equality, obscures its distinctive features as a regime, and the concerns with equality (and freedom) which animate them.

Equal opportunity for political influence may be an unfair metric of equality for lottocracy, too (compare Guerrero, 2024, 231–3 on equal respect, power, and opportunity to be decisive). Lottocrats believe that the *impartial* consideration of people’s interests by government is necessary for equality and good government, not their *equal* consideration – because our interests may not be legitimate. They may therefore prefer to *eliminate* opportunities for political influence rather than to *equalize* them, because the latter has no intrinsic value and may prove difficult or impossible to achieve. Lottocrats, therefore, commonly seek to *insulate* politics from corruption and capture via sortition and citizen assemblies, rotation and a reliance on “non-political” judgments by courts and experts, rather than to promote equality by *balancing* opposing interests/forces (e.g., Guerrero, 167, 203–13). Failure to ensure equal opportunity for political influence, then, may be less damaging to the democratic credentials of lottocracy and electoral democracy than Landa and Pevnick suggest. The political opportunities that matter to democracy are not

reducible to opportunities for *influence*; and democratic equality is not reducible to the *opportunities* we have. The rapid succession of intriguing arguments in *Representative Democracy* makes for a fascinating and provocative book. However, it is not always clear that Landa and Pevnick's arguments hit their targets, nor that the distinctive value of electoral democracy is best illuminated by those arguments and targets.