

Access to Higher Education and Support for Meritocracy: Effort, Skill, and Education as Components of Merit

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Abstract: Prior research has emphasized perceptions of effort-based meritocracy (i.e., the descriptive belief that hard work leads to success), noting a rising trend in meritocratic beliefs across countries. The current study proposes focusing on three components of merit—effort, skill, and education—and on a less-examined form of meritocratic beliefs: *support for meritocracy* (i.e., the prescriptive belief that society *should* distribute rewards based on merit). Analyzing the 2009 International Social Survey Programme data, this study demonstrates the role of higher education in shaping heterogeneity in support for meritocracy. College-educated individuals seem to reject effort-based meritocracy while strongly supporting skill- and education-based meritocracy. In addition, the gap between the college-educated and the non-college-educated in supporting education-based meritocracy is larger in countries with broader access to higher education. These findings suggest that people may refer to different dimensions of meritocracy when supporting or disapproving “meritocracy,” calling for refined policy interventions to reduce social inequalities.

Keywords: support for meritocracy; effort-based meritocracy; skill-based meritocracy; education-based meritocracy; higher education; access to tertiary education

Reproducibility Package: A reproducibility package that includes codes and macro-level data is available at <https://github.com/INVEST-flagship/Kwon-Erola-2026>. The ISSP 2009 survey data cannot be uploaded to publicly available locations, because the data can be accessed only after the user registration through the GESIS portal. The ISSP 2009 data are available via the GESIS portal: <https://www.gesis.org/en/issp/data-and-documentation/social-inequality/2009>.

Citation: Kwon, Hye Won, Jani Erola. 2026. “Access to Higher Education and Support for Meritocracy: Effort, Skill, and Education as Components of Merit” *Sociological Science* 13: 997-1017.

Received: August 5, 2025

Accepted: July 5, 2026

Published: August 18, 2026

Editor(s): Ari Adut, Nan Dirk de Graaf

DOI: 10.15195/v13.a38

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MERITOCRACY is one of the concepts that has been actively discussed in public discourse across countries. The term was coined by Michael Young in his book, *The Rise of Meritocracy* ([1958] 2017), where he sarcastically illustrates the social system in which social rewards are determined by one’s merit. Defining merit as a combination of IQ and effort (“merit = IQ + effort”), Young ([1958] 2017) criticized the tendency to overemphasize talent, which is believed to be measured by IQ tests, in the rewarding system in Britain at that time. Despite his intention to deliver a critique against meritocratic ideas, people in contemporary societies seem to embrace the notion of meritocracy as a fair and just system to replace the previous social system, where ascription or even plutocracy and aristocracy were the main contributors to social inequalities across societies. Indeed, recent scholarship has documented that popular beliefs in meritocracy (i.e., “If a person works hard, s/he will succeed”) have become stronger among recent cohorts in most Western countries (Mijis 2018).

Despite the definition of merit consisting of multiple components that was originally proposed by Young ([1958] 2017) and later scholars (e.g., Breen and Goldthorpe 2001), one's hard work has been promoted as the primary component of meritocracy in public discourse across countries.¹ One's beliefs in effort-based meritocracy, that is, whether and to what extent people believe that personal effort matters to success, have been at the center of popular discourse and prior meritocracy literature (e.g., Mijs 2018; Mijs et al. 2022).

However, effort is not the sole component constituting the notion of merit. Building on Breen and Goldthorpe (2001), who defined merit as effort, ability/skill, and educational qualification, we argue that more scholarly attention should be directed toward three different components of meritocracy: education-based meritocracy, skill-based meritocracy, and effort-based meritocracy. Although people's perceptions of effort-based meritocracy have been extensively studied (e.g., Mijs 2018; Mijs et al. 2022; Wang and Olivos 2024), the other two components, namely education and skill, have received relatively little attention (e.g., see Duru-Bellat and Tenret 2012 for a rare exception for studying education-based meritocracy and Kwon and Pandian 2024 for skill-based meritocracy).

Education has long been considered a central tenet of meritocracy, often being acknowledged as a legitimate determinant of one's social status (van Noord et al. 2019). Public preferences for education-based meritocracy are paradoxical given the well-established evidence on family socioeconomic and cultural background being a strong predictor of educational attainment and academic outcomes (e.g., Bourdieu 1984; Calarco 2011; Lareau 2011; Olivos 2024). This paradox calls for empirical scrutiny of education-based meritocracy and the conditions that shape people's attitudes toward it.

In addition, a person's ability or skill is repeatedly shown to be one of the key factors in getting ahead (e.g., Barone and van de Werfhorst 2011; Breen and Goldthorpe 2001; Liu and Grusky 2013). However, researchers have shown that not only skills, but also educational credentials alone, play an important role in shaping one's economic success (Araki 2023; Bol 2015). In Europe, people's beliefs about skill-based meritocracy tend to show somewhat greater variation across countries than beliefs about the importance of effort (Kwon and Pandian 2024), but items related to people's attitudes toward skills are less available in cross-cultural datasets with large samples. This has partly motivated prior studies to focus their empirical research more on effort and/or education than on skill, which further calls for expanding our attention to people's beliefs about skill-based meritocracy.

Furthermore, we propose turning our scholarly attention to another form of meritocratic beliefs that has been relatively less-examined than perceptions of meritocracy—*support for meritocracy*. Support for meritocracy indicates one's prescriptive beliefs that society *should* distribute rewards (e.g., salary, social status, etc.) based on the meritocratic system. Because support for meritocracy captures people's normative beliefs about meritocracy (i.e., "what ought to be"), it should be distinguished from perceptions of meritocracy, which reflect people's evaluation of whether meritocracy works in reality (i.e., "what is"). Glossing over it as "meritocratic beliefs" in general, most of the previous research heavily relies on perceptions of meritocracy, which capture an individual's descriptive beliefs that social rewards

are distributed based on one's merit in their society (e.g., Batruch et al. 2023; Mijs 2018; Mijs et al. 2022; Olivos 2021; Reynolds and Xian 2014; Wang and Olivos 2024; Xian and Reynolds 2017). Although some studies have examined the relationship between higher education and support for education-based meritocracy (e.g., Duru-Bellat and Tenret 2012) or general support for meritocracy, without distinguishing the merit components (e.g., Kunovich and Slomczynski 2007), prior research has shown little interest in examining people's support for the other components of merit (e.g., effort and skill).

The current study aims to examine the role of structural conditions, specifically having a college degree and subjective social mobility experience, and whether access to higher education, as a country-level condition, moderates the role of the college degree in supporting meritocracy. Education, particularly tertiary education, has been documented as serving a crucial role in the allocation of social status in contemporary society (Bills, Di Stasio, and Gërkhani 2017; Sewell 1971). In this context, a society's broader access to higher education may indicate that it offers better conditions for the equality of opportunity to its members. Given that the social environment serves as an important source of one's worldview (e.g., Mijs 2021), it is crucial to apply a cross-national lens to meritocratic beliefs.

Prior studies have suggested that a higher education degree can function as "a clear dividing line" (van Noord et al. 2019:667) in a society where higher education is widely shared; higher-educated individuals may feel threatened in less unequal contexts where their relative status advantage is weaker (Batruch et al. 2023). This perceived threat could motivate highly educated individuals who live in societies with broader access to higher education to support meritocratic reward distribution based on one's educational credentials.

Previously, Duru-Bellat and Tenret (2012) examined the direct effect of country-level educational context, measured through the share of students enrolled in tertiary education, and found no significant effect on people's support for education-based meritocracy. We consider this too broad an indicator for our purpose, and suggest that the cohort-specific proportion of individuals with a college degree would provide a more accurate proxy for equality of opportunity in society, considering how a college degree functions as a credential on the job market (e.g., Bills et al. 2017; Breen and Jonsson 2005 for discussions). Accordingly, this study examines the moderating role of the country-level proportion of higher education in the relationship between a person's educational attainment and support for meritocracy, in particular, education-based meritocracy.

Analyzing international survey data (i.e., International Social Survey Programme [ISSP] data) collected from more than 30 countries, the current study examines the social grounds of meritocratic beliefs, specifying three key components of merit: education, skill, and effort. Particularly focusing on one's college degree, the current study demonstrates that people's support for meritocracy differs by one's social conditions: in particular, the college-educated seem to draw a clear boundary against effort-based meritocracy while lending stronger support for meritocracy based on the other two dimensions (skill and education). In addition, the gap between the college-educated and non-college-educated individuals in supporting education-based meritocracy is larger in countries with broader access to higher education,

suggesting the important role of higher education in shaping one's support for meritocracy. Given that prior research suggests that meritocratic beliefs have social consequences (e.g., justifying social inequalities; e.g., Mijs 2021), demonstrating the social grounds of these beliefs could offer important policy implications for effective interventions to alleviate social inequalities and further reduce people's negative attitudes toward social policies to address these inequalities.

Background

Three Components of Merit: Effort, Education, and Skill

Meritocracy refers to the social system where individuals' outcomes are determined by their merit, not by their class origin (e.g., Hoyt et al. 2021; Littler 2013). Theoretically, merit is defined as effort, ability, and/or educational attainment (Breen and Goldthorpe 2001). Among the multiple components of meritocracy, *effort-based meritocracy* (e.g., Mijs 2018; Mijs et al. 2022) has received great attention across countries, with research evidence documenting people's strong beliefs in effort-based meritocracy in most Western countries (Kwon and Pandian 2024; Mijs 2018) as well as East Asian countries, including China (Wang and Olivos 2024; Zhu 2025) and Japan (Mijs 2018). Both scholarly attention and public emphasis on personal effort are deeply rooted in long-established cultural traditions that attach moral values to hard work across countries; the notion of the American dream in the United States (Stokas 2015; Xian and Reynolds 2017), the "Aspiration Nation" in the United Kingdom (Littler 2013; Mendick, Allen and Harvey 2015), and the Confucian tradition emphasizing hard work in East Asian countries (Olivos 2021; Xian and Reynolds 2017) are well-acknowledged examples, to name a few. This notion is partly strengthened by the rising trend of emphasizing independence and individualization in the face of life adversities (e.g., job insecurities) after the Great Recession in 2008 (Mendick et al. 2015). These cultural and social contexts have promoted public beliefs about the importance of individuals' hard work to get ahead. Building on these beliefs, hard work is often considered a common-sense proxy for effort, which then likely yields broad support for effort-based meritocracy within and across countries.

Another dimension of meritocracy that has been studied in sociology is education-based meritocracy. Despite prior literature on educational inequality documenting substantial evidence that higher-class individuals could utilize their socioeconomic and cultural capital to help their children achieve better educational outcomes than others (e.g., Boudon 1974; Bourdieu 1984; Calarco 2011; Lareau 2011; Olivos 2024), education is often deemed a legitimate determinant of success in life (e.g., van Noord et al. 2019), generating "a broad consensus that formal education serves as a reasonable proxy for merit" (Bills 2019:89). This consensus may motivate people's support for education-based meritocracy. Prior studies have examined socioeconomic disparities in supporting education-based meritocracy. For example, Duru-Bellat and Tenret (2012) reported that higher-educated individuals show stronger support for education-based meritocracy than lower-educated individuals. Given that education plays a central role in the discourse of meritocracy (Bills 2019), examining people's attitudes toward education-based meritocracy becomes crucial

to making sense of the complex grounds of support for meritocracy within and across countries.

Compared to effort and education, (acquired) skills as another pillar of meritocracy have received little attention in previous literature.² This empirical scarcity is somewhat surprising given that the classic definition of meritocracy incorporates ability or skills as merit (Breen and Goldthorpe 2001). Despite the theoretical emphasis on a person's ability or skills, people's beliefs about skill-based meritocracy seem less solid than those about other merit principles: empirical research has reported that people tend to hold relatively inconsistent attitudes toward skill-based meritocracy, showing greater variance across European countries than beliefs about the importance of effort (e.g., Kwon and Pandian 2024). Despite the theoretical and empirical importance of skill-based meritocracy, research on this component remains relatively limited. One practical reason is related to the availability of the survey measures for merit components in large-scale survey data (Kwon and Pandian 2024), including the General Social Survey and the ISSP. Prior studies have focused on the perception of meritocracy (e.g., "hard work is important for getting ahead in life") and either used the item about effort (hard work; e.g., Mijs 2018) or combined items about hard work, a good education, and ambition to measure "meritocratic elements," contrasting them with other "non-meritocratic" items such as a person's race, gender, coming from a wealthy family, or having well-educated parents (e.g., Reynolds and Xian 2014; Xian and Reynolds 2017; see Zhu 2025 for examining the multidimensionality of the perception of meritocracy using latent class analysis). To fill this gap in previous literature, the present study defines merit as effort, (acquired) skills, and educational attainment to offer a more nuanced understanding of meritocracy and its social ground across countries.

Support for Meritocracy

The vast majority of prior studies have relied on what earlier scholars refer to as the descriptive belief about meritocracy or the perception of meritocracy, which captures a person's belief that society allocates social status or rewards based on merit (e.g., Batruch et al. 2023; Mijs 2018; Mijs et al. 2022; Olivos 2021; Reynolds and Xian 2014; Wang and Olivos 2024; Xian and Reynolds 2017; Zhu 2025). The perception of meritocracy concerns one's understanding of how the reward system works in their society (i.e., rewards *are* distributed according to one's effort in society). Another form of meritocratic beliefs suggested by prior studies is *support for meritocracy* (Duru-Bellat and Tenret 2012; Son Hing et al. 2011; van Noord et al. 2019). Support for meritocracy is distinguished from the perception of meritocracy as it captures the prescriptive belief about meritocracy, which refers to one's beliefs about how the reward system *should* work (i.e., rewards *should* be distributed according to one's effort in society). As such, this form of meritocratic beliefs is often referred to as desired meritocracy (van Noord et al. 2019), pro-meritocratic attitudes (Kunovich and Slomczynski 2007) or "preference[s] for the merit principle" (Son Hing et al. 2011:433) because it taps onto people's normative beliefs (i.e., "what ought to be") about how society should distribute the rewards.

The current study suggests examining support for meritocracy based on effort, skills, and education. *Support for effort-based meritocracy* refers to a person's belief that rewards should be distributed according to one's effort; that is, those who put in more effort should receive more rewards, such as higher status, salary, etc. *Support for skill-based meritocracy* indicates the belief that rewards should be determined according to one's skills; that is, those who do the job well should receive higher status or salary. *Support for education-based meritocracy* refers to the belief that rewards should be distributed according to one's education; that is, those who spend more years in education and training to do the job should be rewarded more.

Although public discourse often lumps three components of meritocracy together, people's attitudes toward these components seem to vary. At the country level, prior studies have suggested that there is less heterogeneity in people's support for or acknowledgment of personal hard work and educational credentials as legitimate determinants of success across countries (e.g., Kwon and Pandian 2024; Mijs 2018; van Noord et al. 2019), whereas people's attitudes toward skills tend to show relatively greater heterogeneity across countries (Kwon and Pandian 2024). At the individual level, these three components may not be aligned together; rather, a person's support for meritocracy could differ by the component of merit. For example, one may think that their society should reward one's hard work (i.e., stronger support for effort-based meritocracy) but not one's education (i.e., weaker support for education-based meritocracy). In contrast, another person may think that one's education and skills should be rewarded (i.e., stronger support for education-based and skill-based meritocracy) but not one's effort (i.e., weaker support for effort-based meritocracy).³

Prior studies pointed out the tendency to justify the existing inequalities among lower status groups, although it is disadvantageous to themselves (e.g., Jost and Hunyady 2003). Similarly, despite the possibility that meritocracy justifies current inequalities, individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may be more inclined to support meritocracy, particularly when effort is considered an element of merit. This tendency likely arises because endorsing effort, which appears less fixed and more malleable than other merit elements, may increase their perceived chances of upward mobility. Considering the puzzling tendency related to support for meritocracy, identifying which component of meritocracy receives stronger support from people and what contributes to such variance could offer a more nuanced understanding of broad support for meritocracy across social strata and cultures in contemporary society.

The Social Grounds of Support for Meritocracy: Education and Subjective Social Mobility

Previous studies have explored the role of a person's social location in shaping meritocratic beliefs. Education and subjective social mobility are the two individual-level conditions that have been relatively heavily studied in relation to meritocratic beliefs (e.g., Batruch et al. 2023; Duru-Bellat and Tenret 2012; Kunovich and Slomczynski 2007; Mijs et al. 2022; van Noord et al. 2019; Xian and Reynolds 2017).

In particular, education has been suggested as serving as “a clear dividing line” (van Noord et al. 2019) in meritocratic beliefs. For example, Kuppens et al. (2018) found that higher-educated people tend to draw a clearer boundary against those without a college degree than against the poor or the working class, particularly when higher education is widely accessible in society. In such a social condition, education is regarded as a matter of individual responsibility, and this notion in part enables those with higher education to draw a clear boundary against those without a college degree and think that they deserve their life outcomes (ibid.). Batruch et al. (2023) also found that more educated individuals who strongly believe in school meritocracy are less likely to perceive social inequality as unfair or support redistribution policies than their less educated counterparts. In this sense, for higher-educated individuals, belief in school meritocracy serves to legitimize the current social hierarchy as well as to justify their merit and privileges over lower-educated individuals.

Researchers found that higher-educated individuals tend to show stronger support for education-based meritocracy than less-educated individuals (Duru-Bellat and Tenret 2012; van Noord et al. 2019). Kunovich and Slomczynski (2007) relied on rational action theories to understand the positive association between higher education and stronger support for meritocracy. For those who obtained higher education, it is rational to lend strong support for meritocracy because they are the ones who get benefits from the meritocratic system. Based on prior research (Batruch et al. 2023; Duru-Bellat and Tenret 2012; Kuppens et al. 2018; van Noord et al. 2019), we expect that college-educated individuals are more likely to support meritocratic systems that reward one’s education (Hypothesis 1-1).

Discussions related to educational credentialism (e.g., Bills et al. 2017) suggest that higher-educated people view skills as an element closely related to education rather than effort. Education, particularly higher education, is often considered a signal of one’s capacity or skills (i.e., job performance), and this presumption might be stronger for those who have obtained such educational credentials. As one related example, the findings of Kwon and Pandian (2024) suggested that college-educated individuals tend to emphasize the importance of skills in reward distribution more than non-college-educated individuals. Thus, the relationship between a college degree and support for skill-based meritocracy is likely to align with the association between a college degree and support for education-based meritocracy. Based on prior research evidence, we expect that those who obtained higher education (college degree) may offer stronger support for skill-based meritocracy than those without a college degree (Hypothesis 1-2).

We know relatively less about the role of higher education in one’s support for meritocracy based on effort. Prior research on the perception of effort-based meritocracy has documented inconsistent findings about the effect of education. Findings from Kwon and Pandian (2024) suggested that higher-educated individuals are more likely to consider personal effort as an important determinant of getting ahead than the lower-educated individuals in European countries, whereas Duru-Bellat and Tenret (2012) found no significant education effect on perceptions of meritocracy (based on effort and skills) across most countries in the dataset. Rather, the literature on the compensating role of non-cognitive skills such as perseverance and

conscientiousness (Danner, Lechner, and Rammstedt 2020; Shanahan et al. 2014) suggests that individuals without certain credentials (e.g., tertiary education) that are highly rewarded in society may think that their hard work is the only way they could climb up the social ladder (e.g., Morris et al. 2022). Thus, individuals without a college education could be more likely to support effort-based meritocracy than the college-educated individuals (Hypothesis 1-3).

Hypothesis 1-1: Individuals with college degrees are *more* likely to support education-based meritocracy.

Hypothesis 1-2: Individuals with college degrees are *more* likely to support skill-based meritocracy.

Hypothesis 1-3: Individuals with college degrees are *less* likely to support effort-based meritocracy.

One's subjective mobility experience is another important condition shaping meritocratic beliefs. Several studies have documented a positive relationship between subjective social mobility and the perception of meritocracy in different countries (Mijs et al. 2022; Reynolds and Xian 2014; Xian and Reynolds 2017): that is, those with subjective upward mobility tend to show a stronger perception of meritocracy in the Netherlands (Mijs et al. 2022), China, and the United States (Xian and Reynolds 2017). The legitimization thesis or motivated reasoning perspectives (Mijs et al. 2022; Shepelak 1989) argue that those who experience upward mobility are motivated to justify their success by thinking that their success is led by their own merit. Experiential inference perspectives also support the positive association between upward mobility and perception of meritocracy: those who have experienced upward mobility themselves could believe that society is meritocratic because society allows them to climb up the social ladder (Mijs et al. 2022). However, we do not know yet if the same relationship would be observed with support for meritocracy.

For those with downward mobility, motivated reasoning perspectives (Mijs et al. 2022) and the underdog thesis (Xian and Reynolds 2017) suggest that those who experienced downward mobility would be more likely to oppose the belief that society is meritocratic; instead of attributing their downward mobility to their lack of merit, they are more motivated to attribute it to external factors. Meanwhile, Mijs et al. (2022) argued that experiential inference perspectives produce mixed predictions about the role of downward mobility. On the one hand, the personal experience of moving downward despite their hard work may encourage people to believe that society is not meritocratic (i.e., a weaker perception of meritocracy). On the other hand, the downward mobility of individuals from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, for instance, may be seen as proof that one's success is not solely defined by one's background (Mijs et al. 2022). This may fuel the belief that society is meritocratic (i.e., a stronger perception of meritocracy). Analyzing the survey data from a representative Dutch sample, Mijs et al. (2022) found that those who moved downward are more likely to hold structuralist perspectives (i.e., attributing success to external factors rather than merit) but failed to find a significant association between downward mobility and meritocratic beliefs. This perception that success is determined by non-meritocratic elements (i.e., the weaker perception of meritocracy) may, in turn, motivate these individuals to strongly

support meritocracy; because they think society is not meritocratic enough, they may show stronger support for meritocracy than those with no mobility experience.

As these prior studies have heavily focused on the perception of meritocracy (i.e., the belief that hard work will bring success), we know little about the role of subjective social mobility in *support* for meritocracy. Based on motivated reasoning perspectives (Mijs et al. 2022), we expect that those who moved up the social ladder may support the meritocratic reward system as it can justify their success (Hypothesis 2-1). The motivation to justify their success would be stronger among those who experience subjective upward mobility compared to those whose socioeconomic status does not differ from their parents' (i.e., no mobility). In addition, based on experiential inference perspectives, we expect a positive association between downward mobility and support for meritocracy (Hypothesis 2-2): individuals who fall down the social ladder may support meritocratic reward systems as they think their failure (i.e., downward mobility) is due to the non-meritocratic system of their society. Through their experience of downward mobility, they may be more motivated to think that their society is not meritocratic enough, thereby lending stronger support for meritocracy.

Hypothesis 2-1: Individuals who experience upward mobility are *more* likely to support meritocracy than those with no mobility experience.

Hypothesis 2-2: Individuals who experience downward mobility are *more* likely to support meritocracy than those with no mobility experience.

Access to Higher Education as One Under-Examined Country-Level Condition

One important condition that likely shapes the relationship between structural locations and meritocratic beliefs is the degree of *access to higher education* in a country. Theoretically, one of the core tenets of meritocracy is equality of opportunity (Liu 2011). Equality of opportunity indicates the condition in which people have the same starting point and the same chance to succeed. In an ideal meritocratic society, only when people start from the same point and have an equal opportunity to succeed, the difference in life outcomes could be attributed to differences in one's merit (e.g., effort, ability, or skills). In particular, researchers have paid attention to access to higher education as a key component of equality of opportunity, given that higher education functions as one of the important credentials to allocate social positions in contemporary society (e.g., Bills et al. 2017; Sewell 1971). In this sense, broad access to higher education, that is, the condition in which the majority of people attain postsecondary education, could be viewed as a proxy for equality of opportunity.

Several studies have examined the role of access to higher education in understanding people's beliefs in meritocracy. For example, Duru-Bellat and Tenret (2012) examined the role of education at both the individual and country levels in shaping one's perception of effort- and skill-based meritocracy (although the authors lumped them into the "perception of meritocracy" without distinguishing between these two dimensions) and support for education-based meritocracy. Analyzing the

ISSP 1999 data from 26 countries, the authors found a positive association between the years of education (at the individual level) and support for education-based meritocracy, controlling for other variables. However, the effect of the share of students enrolled in tertiary education (at the country level) was not statistically significant. Kunovich and Slomczynski (2007) analyzed the ISSP 1992 data from 14 countries using general support for meritocracy, which summed up people's support for meritocratic elements and disapproval of non-meritocratic elements, and found that higher-educated individuals and those residing in countries with higher proportions of the population in tertiary education are more likely to hold stronger general support for meritocracy.

Although both studies contributed to our understanding of support for meritocracy, these studies focused on testing the direct effect of country-level educational contexts, not the moderating role of these contexts (i.e., whether access to higher education at the country level shapes the relationship between one's college degree and support for meritocracy). Also, the measures used in their studies are slightly different from the ones used in our study. For example, Duru-Bellat and Tenret (2012) relied on the share of students enrolled in tertiary education (along with average returns to education and the share of tertiary education students majoring in social science and law) to measure the degree to which the country is educated on average. Kunovich and Slomczynski (2007) used the percentage of the population in tertiary education. However, they did not investigate cohort-specific indices for the proportion of tertiary education.

Given that a college degree acts as a credential on the job market and educational expansion has proceeded in many developed countries in recent decades (e.g., Bills et al. 2017; Bol 2015 for discussions), we suggest that the cohort-specific proportion of college degree holders (i.e., the share of the college-educated), rather than the overall share of students enrolled in college without acknowledging cohort differences, would provide a more accurate proxy for equality of opportunity in society. Prior studies on educational inequalities have suggested that the educational gap in people's attitudes toward social systems such as meritocracy gets larger when higher education is widely accessible in society (Batruch et al. 2023; van Noord et al. 2019). This calls for empirical scrutiny of how country-level access to higher education shapes the relationship between individual education and support for meritocracy based on different merit components (i.e., education, skills, and effort).

As one related example, van Noord et al. (2019) argued that, particularly in societies with a greater proportion of people with higher education, higher-educated individuals seem to rely more heavily on a college degree as a distinctive marker for status differentiation. They may feel that their status advantage is threatened and insecure, and this could encourage them to more strongly support education-based meritocracy to secure their relative status advantage and legitimize their position in the social hierarchy (Batruch et al. 2023; van Noord et al. 2019). In line with this argument, Batruch et al. (2023) found that higher-educated individuals with stronger beliefs in school meritocracy are more likely to present favorable attitudes toward existing social inequalities (i.e., lower levels of support for distributive policies and the perception that social inequality is unfair) than their lower-educated counterparts, especially when they live in a more egalitarian context.

The current study suggests that mixed evidence about the association between education and meritocratic beliefs across countries in prior studies (e.g., Duru-Bellat and Tenret 2012; Xian and Reynolds 2017) could partly relate to differing levels of access to tertiary education in countries. In a society, where tertiary education is less accessible and obtained only by a limited number of privileged members of the society (e.g., those who are already advantaged), allocating rewards based on one's education may seem to be less justifiable even for those with such credentials because the attainment of higher education could be more assumed to happen by chance or privilege rather than one's merit.

However, in a society where tertiary education as a social resource is largely accessible to a large number of people and it is likely that individuals can achieve tertiary education regardless of their origin status (i.e., broad access to higher education among society members), people who attain a tertiary education may be more motivated to lend strong support for education-based meritocracy (i.e., rewards should be allocated based on educational qualifications). On the one hand, in such a society, people, particularly those who obtained a tertiary education, may believe that the society has reached some levels of equality of opportunity, which may, in turn, encourage them to believe that educational outcomes are individuals' responsibility and to justify the allocation of rewards based on education (Kuppens et al. 2018). On the other hand, as van Noord et al. (2019) and Batruch et al. (2023) suggested, higher-educated individuals are more motivated to legitimize their status through stronger support for education-based meritocracy "when symbolic... resources are more at stake" (Batruch et al. 2023:12). However, in such a society, those without tertiary education (despite broad access to tertiary education) may find little motivation to support education-based meritocracy because it is disadvantageous to them. Thus, we expect that the effect of college on support for education-based meritocracy would be larger in countries with broader access to tertiary education (Hypothesis 3).

Hypothesis 3: The college gap in support for education-based meritocracy would be larger in countries with broader access to tertiary education.

However, we do not have the same expectations for other dimensions of meritocracy (i.e., effort-based and skill-based meritocracy) because it is rather unclear that access to tertiary education would moderate the college gap in support for effort- and skill-based meritocracy.

Data and Measures

Data

The data come from the 2009 ISSP. The initial sample of the dataset included 56,021 respondents from 41 countries. Eight countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, New Zealand, Philippines, Taiwan, Ukraine, and Venezuela) were excluded as they do not have available data on either of the three country-level indices of our interest (proportion of tertiary education, GDP per capita, and Gini index). In addition,

Portugal was excluded as the question of support for skill-based meritocracy was not asked. We further limited our sample to individuals aged 25–64 years old, which left 31,669 respondents aged between 25 and 64 years old in 32 countries for our valid sample. This decision was made based on our focus on access to higher education: in our study, we use the cohort-specific proportion of tertiary education to measure access to higher education in each country. Compared to the national average scores that ignore between-cohort differences, the use of cohort-specific data on how many people in each cohort obtained tertiary education offers more accurate information about the degree of access to higher education. The World Bank data on the proportion of tertiary education covers only people aged 25–64 years old, not offering the proportion of tertiary-educated people among those aged 65 years or older. For these theoretical and practical reasons, we decided to limit our sample to those aged 25–64 years old. After the list-wise deletion of missing cases, the final sample includes 30,135 individuals from 32 countries.

Measures

Building on prior studies that used the previous ISSP datasets (e.g., Duru-Bellat and Tenret 2012; Kunovich and Slomczynski 2007), we used respondents' answers to the following question for a measure of support for meritocracy: "In deciding how much people ought to earn, how important should each of these things be, in your opinion?" This question allowed respondents to indicate their degree of support for each of the three components of meritocracy. *Support for education-based meritocracy* is measured by responses about "the number of years spent in education and training," *support for skill-based meritocracy* is measured by responses about "how well he or she does the job," and *support for effort-based meritocracy* is measured by responses about "how hard he or she works at the job."⁴ Responses are rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = not important at all to 5 = essential).

The independent variables are *college* (1 = college degree and 0 = without college degree) and subjective social mobility. To measure *subjective social mobility*, we followed prior research (e.g., Mijs et al. 2022) and used social ladder questions to determine one's subjective social status and subjective family social status in childhood, where responses ranged from "1 bottom" to "10 top." We grouped responses to both questions into "low status," "middle status," and "high status" and drew a mobility table of social origin (subjective family social status) and social destination (respondents' subjective social status). From the mobility table, we classified subjective upward mobility (11.6 percent), subjective downward mobility (18.0 percent), and no mobility (70.4 percent). Age, gender (1 = female), and marital status (1 = married) are included as covariates. In addition, we have three country-level indices: the Gini index, GDP per capita, and the cohort-specific proportion of tertiary education are drawn from the World Bank (2023) and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2023) databases to measure income inequality, economic development, and access to higher education, respectively.⁵ All the continuous independent variables are grand-mean centered. Descriptive statistics are presented in Appendix A1 of the online supplement.

Analytic Plan

As the ISSP data have a hierarchical structure, where individuals (level 1) are clustered in countries (level 2), we conducted a multilevel analysis (i.e., random slope models) to test our research hypotheses. To test Hypotheses 1-1 to 1-3, we regressed three outcome variables (support for education-based meritocracy, skill-based meritocracy, and effort-based meritocracy) on education (college degree), controlling for other covariates at individual and country levels (M1.1, M2.1, and M3.1). In Model 2 (M1.2, M2.2, and M3.2), we added the cross-level interaction term between education (college degree) and the cohort-specific proportion of tertiary education to test the moderating role of access to higher education (proportion of tertiary education) in the relationship between a college degree and support for meritocracy (Hypothesis 3). Finally, in Model 3 (M1.3, M2.3, and M3.3), we added social mobility (no mobility as a reference category) into the model to test Hypothesis 2, which argues for the role of one's social mobility experience in support of meritocracy.

Results

Table 1 shows multilevel regression results to test our hypotheses (see Appendix A2 in the online supplement for full results). Supporting our Hypotheses 1-1 and 1-2, we found that college-educated people show stronger support for education-based meritocracy (M1.1) and skill-based meritocracy (M2.1) than those without a college degree. In contrast, support for effort-based meritocracy was stronger among those without a college degree than among those with a college degree (Hypothesis 1-3; M3.1), presenting a negative relationship. This finding implies that people's support for meritocracy differs by component of merit: more educated people seem to lend strong support for meritocratic reward systems based on education and skills that are likely advantageous to them. Instead, effort as merit seems to be interpreted differently by these people: higher-educated individuals may see effort as a less justifiable element to get more reward, lending weaker support for effort-based meritocracy. In contrast, lower-educated individuals seem to place greater weight on effort than the other two elements (education and skills) as a component of merit that ought to be rewarded.

In addition, as hypothesized, we found a statistically significant interaction effect between college and access to higher education on support for education-based meritocracy (M1.2), while we did not find evidence for the moderating effect of access to higher education on the other dimensions of meritocracy (M2.2 and M3.2). Figure 1 shows that the gap between the college-educated and the non-college-educated in support of education-based meritocracy is larger in countries with a higher proportion of tertiary education than in countries with a lower proportion of tertiary education. This result supports Hypothesis 3, which argues that the college gap in support for education-based meritocracy is larger in countries with broader access to higher education than in countries with limited access to higher education.

In addition, we found that our Hypothesis 2-1 (i.e., individuals who experience upward mobility are more likely to support meritocracy) and Hypothesis 2-2 (i.e., individuals who experience downward mobility are more likely to support

Table 1: Multilevel Analysis of Support for Meritocracy on Education and Social Mobility (observations = 30,135; Country N = 32).

	Education-Based Meritocracy			Skill-Based Meritocracy			Effort-Based Meritocracy		
	M1.1	M1.2	M1.3	M2.1	M2.2	M2.3	M3.1	M3.2	M3.3
Proportion of tertiary education	-0.002 (0.001)	-0.003** (0.001)	-0.003** (0.001)	0.002 (0.001)	0.002 (0.001)	0.002 (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)
College (=1)	0.113** (0.028)	0.094** (0.029)	0.093** (0.029)	0.079** (0.015)	0.077** (0.015)	0.076** (0.015)	-0.064** (0.020)	-0.059** (0.020)	-0.059** (0.020)
College * Tertiary education		0.006** (0.002)	0.006** (0.002)		0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)		-0.002 (0.001)	-0.002 (0.001)
Subjective social mobility ^a			0.023 (0.016)			0.030* (0.014)		0.033* (0.014)	0.033* (0.014)
Downward mobility			0.020 (0.013)			0.042** (0.011)		0.035** (0.012)	0.035** (0.012)
Upward mobility									
Random slope variance (College)	0.019	0.020	0.020	0.003	0.003	0.003	0.008	0.008	0.008
Random intercept variance	0.035	0.034	0.034	0.016	0.016	0.016	0.027	0.027	0.027
Residual variance	0.720	0.719	0.719	0.538	0.538	0.537	0.596	0.596	0.595
Intra-class correlation	0.047	0.045	0.045	0.029	0.029	0.029	0.044	0.044	0.044
AIC	75,799.44	75,787.16	75,787.44	66,970.12	66,971.78	66,959.54	70,086.08	70,086.5	70,078.63

Note: Unstandardized coefficients appear above the standard errors in parentheses. All models are controlled for the Gini index, GDP per capita (logged), age, gender, and marital status. All continuous variables are grand-mean centered. See Appendix A2 in the online supplement for the table with full information.

^aReference: No mobility.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed tests).

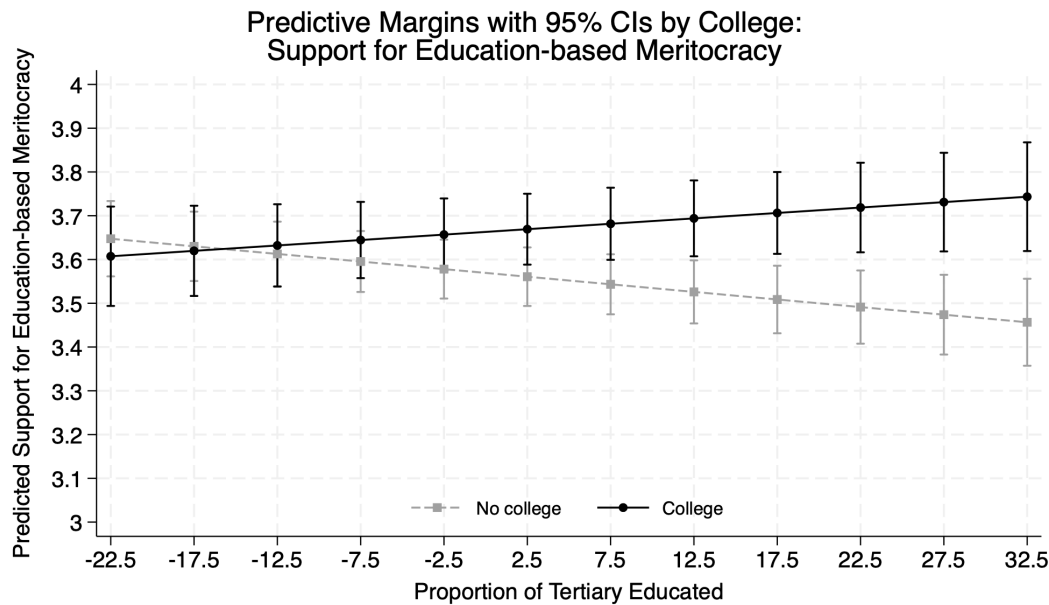


Figure 1: The moderating role of the cohort-specific proportion of tertiary education on the relationship between a college degree and support for education-based meritocracy (Model 1.3 of Table 1).

meritocracy) are partly supported by our data. Those who experienced upward mobility and downward mobility are more likely to show stronger support for skill-based meritocracy and effort-based meritocracy than those with no mobility (M2.3 and M3.3). However, we did not find the same relationship in explaining support for education-based meritocracy (M1.3).

Robustness Check

Cross-cultural literature has pointed out that prior studies have heavily relied on samples from the WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) countries (Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010). Meritocracy research is not an exception (but Kunovich and Slomczynski 2007 and Duru-Bellat and Tenret 2012 are a few exceptions for using cross-national data from the ISSP 1992 and ISSP 1999, respectively). As one example, Mijs (2018) confined his analysis to “23 countries in the West” (p.1).⁶ One may suspect that the relationships between college education, support for meritocracy, and access to higher education are limited to the so-called WEIRD cultures. In this robustness check, we included a dummy for WEIRD countries to control for the sociocultural context that is not captured by societal indices (e.g., Gini index, GDP per capita, and proportion of tertiary education) included in our models (see Appendix A3 in the online supplement for full results). Controlling for a dummy for WEIRD countries does not change our findings related to the role of a college degree and subjective social mobility in support for meritocracy, as well as the moderating role of the proportion of tertiary education in the college gap in support of education-based meritocracy. This finding implies that the role of access to higher education in support of meritocracy is not limited to WEIRD countries or non-WEIRD countries.

Discussions and Conclusion

Guided by inconsistent evidence about the role of higher education in support for the three components of meritocracy, our study aims to complement studies on who supports meritocracy, emphasizing the importance of the three different components of meritocracy—education, skills, and effort. The findings of the current study demonstrated that the college effect on support for meritocracy is different across the components of meritocracy (negative on effort-based meritocracy versus positive on education- and skill-based meritocracy). This suggests that the college-educated and the less-educated may attach different meanings to different components of meritocracy.

Specifically, college degree holders seem to distinguish education- and skill-based meritocracy from effort-based meritocracy. Although higher-educated individuals show stronger support for education and skill as merits that ought to be rewarded by society, they do not necessarily see effort as a merit that should be rewarded. These findings align with previous evidence regarding education-based meritocracy (e.g., Duru-Bellat and Tenret 2012; van Noord et al. 2019) and further extend it to skill-based meritocracy. This finding is in line with Araki's argument (2023) that people seem to conflate educational credentials with skills: our finding suggests that this tendency is more clearly found among higher-educated individuals. As Kunovich and Slomczynski (2007) pointed out, for higher-educated individuals, it is rational to support education-based meritocracy because it is advantageous to them. One interesting finding is that the higher educated seem to acknowledge one's skills as merit, but this support is not extended to effort as a component of merit. This suggests that when people say they support or do not support "meritocracy", the content of such support or disapproval might differ by one's social conditions and life experiences. The college-educated seem to draw a clear boundary against effort-based meritocracy.

We also found that the college effect on support for education-based meritocracy seems to be contingent on the country-level proportion of tertiary education, however this moderating effect was not found in other dimensions. Results show that the college effect on support for education-based meritocracy is larger in countries with broader access to tertiary education. This finding indicates that when access to tertiary education is improved, which is often considered the most important indicator of equal opportunity in society, those with a tertiary education tend to support education-based meritocracy to a greater degree. This finding is consistent with previous literature arguing that a higher education degree can function as "a clear dividing line" in more egalitarian contexts (Batruch et al. 2023; Kuppens et al. 2018; van Noord et al. 2019). In contrast, the more constrained the access is, the more it is assumed to happen by chance or privilege. This may discourage higher-educated individuals from emphasizing education as a merit that ought to be rewarded; rather, they would find it less justifiable.

Additionally, stronger support for effort- and skill-based meritocracy from both downward and upward mobility groups (versus those with no mobility experience) suggests broader support for meritocratic ideas in deciding economic returns. This finding partly supports both motivated reasoning and experiential inference perspectives that Mijs et al. (2022) suggested based on the evidence from the Dutch

sample: the life experience of the downwardly moved individuals may lead them to think that the society is not meritocratic enough to reward their effort and skills (i.e., experiential inference perspectives) and thus believe that it is justifiable to support meritocracy based on effort and skills. Meanwhile, the life experience of the upwardly moved individuals could encourage them to believe that the society is meritocratic, and this may further promote their support for meritocracy as it legitimizes their upward mobility as being based on their own effort and skill (i.e., motivated reasoning perspectives). Interestingly, this broad support from both groups for the effort and skill dimensions of meritocracy does not extend to the other dimension of meritocracy—education: there was no significant effect of subjective mobility on support for education-based meritocracy. For those who have the experience of moving up or down the social ladder, effort and skills may be seen as resources legitimate to be rewarded, whereas education is seen as a resource that is less justifiable to ask for more rewards.

The present study is not without limitations. First, as the ISSP dataset is cross-sectional, we were not able to clarify the causal ordering of the relationship between college education and meritocratic beliefs. The direction of the relationship in this study is based on previous literature, which suggests that one's social location plays a key role in shaping meritocratic beliefs (e.g., Duru-Bellat and Tenret 2012; Kunovich and Slomczynski 2007; Mijs et al. 2022). However, we recommend that readers assess the results cautiously as we acknowledge that we cannot rule out the possibility that the relationship goes in the opposite direction. This calls for future research to examine this possibility using longitudinal survey data collected from diverse countries. In addition, based on theoretical and practical reasons for using the cohort-specific proportions of tertiary education at the country level as a more accurate measure of access to higher education, we had to exclude those who were aged 65 or older from our study sample. Future research with macro data including this older population should revisit our argument and examine whether our findings could be extended to older populations.

The present study suggests moving our scholarly attention away from simply relying on the descriptive perception of effort-based meritocracy toward utilizing integrative approaches to understand people's beliefs in meritocracy. By scrutinizing people's support for three key components of meritocratic principles, our study shows the heterogeneity in people's support across components of meritocracy that prior studies have largely failed to capture. Given the prior evidence that a person's meritocratic beliefs are closely related to attitudes toward people in poverty, the understanding of the complex grounds of broad support for meritocracy could help us to figure out ways to alleviate negative attitudes toward social policies and interventions to reduce social inequalities (e.g., Hoyt et al. 2021). When people say they disapprove of or support meritocracy, they might refer to different meritocratic components: although the college-educated support meritocracy based on education and skill, they disapprove of effort-based meritocracy. In contrast, when the lower-educated say they support meritocracy, what they refer to could be meritocracy based on effort rather than education and skills. The findings of our study suggest that social policies aimed at reducing social inequalities and improving the equality of opportunity should refine their interventions to specific target groups: for instance, interventions emphasizing effort-based meritocracy could be more

effective to lower the resistance of the lower-educated, whereas those emphasizing skill-based meritocracy might be more effective for the college-educated.

Notes

- 1 See Kwon and Pandian (2024) and Zhu (2025) for recent work on the multidimensionality of meritocratic beliefs.
- 2 Although Breen and Goldthorpe (2001) suggested ability as a component of merit, this paper proposes referring to acquired skills rather than ability. Abilities are often considered as innate or, conservatively, having both innate and acquired elements. As mentioned before, Young ([1958] 2017) criticized overemphasizing IQ as a proxy for talent, that is mainly because talent is perceived to be mostly determined at birth (Young [1958] 2017; Sandel 2021). Given that equality of opportunity is a prerequisite for the notion of meritocracy, the term “ability”-based meritocracy may deliver the connotation that the rewards are distributed based on innate traits. To avoid this, we propose acquired skills rather than abilities as a component of merit in our discussion of meritocracy.
- 3 Individuals’ support for meritocracy based on three components is positively related, but distinct from each other. See the Measures section, for detailed discussion.
- 4 Pairwise correlations among the three components of meritocracy ranged from 0.17 (skill-based meritocracy and education-based meritocracy) to 0.24 (education-based meritocracy and effort-based meritocracy), and to 0.60 (skill-based meritocracy and effort-based meritocracy). These three components are positively related but distinct from each other.
- 5 Five countries (Australia, China, Japan, South Africa, and South Korea) did not have Gini index in 2009, so the Gini index in the previous year (2008) was used. For the proportion of tertiary education, information in 2009 was not available for China, Russia, and South Africa (non-OECD countries), so the information in the closest available year (2010) was used.
- 6 However, note that Japan is included in his study sample (Mijs 2018).

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Acknowledgments: This work was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2024S1A5A8020262). We gratefully acknowledge the Research Council of Finland flagship funding (INVEST, decision number 320162) and Academy Professor's funding (STRATEQ, decision number 371741). Direct Correspondence to Hye Won Kwon (E-mail: hwk-wonsoc@ewha.ac.kr).

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