

# CHALLENGING MERITOCRACY: MICHAEL SANDEL'S CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON SOCIAL INEQUALITY AND POPULISM IN MODERN SOCIETY

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**Abstract:** This article examines Michael Sandel's critique of meritocracy and its relevance to the Indonesian context, particularly in relation to educational inequality and the rise of populism. While meritocracy is often celebrated as a system of fairness and equal opportunity, this study demonstrates that it exacerbates structural disparities, reinforces stigma against disadvantaged groups, and fuels resentment that populist leaders can mobilize. Drawing on Sandel's *The Tyranny of Merit* and related literature, this article employs a qualitative approach with critical theory to analyze how meritocratic ideology deepens social divisions by overlooking structural constraints on achievement. The findings reveal that Indonesia's reliance on merit-based educational policies disadvantages rural and marginalized communities, while the resulting frustrations contribute to populist narratives that oppose political and educational elites. As an alternative, Sandel's principle of the *common good* provides a normative framework for reform, emphasizing solidarity, collective responsibility, and shared welfare. By applying these principles to Indonesian social and educational policies, this article highlights a pathway toward reducing inequality, mitigating populist discontent, and strengthening democratic cohesion.

**Keywords:** social inequality, populism, Michael Sandel, meritocracy, common good.

**Abstrak:** Artikel ini mengkaji kritik Michael Sandel terhadap meritokrasi dan relevansinya dalam konteks Indonesia, khususnya terkait ketimpangan pendidikan dan bangkitnya populisme. Meskipun meritokrasi sering dipandang sebagai sistem yang adil karena memberikan kesempatan yang setara, penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa meritokrasi justru memperburuk ketimpangan struktural, memperkuat stigma terhadap kelompok marjinal, serta memicu rasa frustrasi yang kemudian dimanfaatkan oleh para pemimpin populis. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif berbasis teori kritis, artikel ini menganalisis karya Sandel *The Tyranny of Merit* beserta literatur terkait untuk menyoroti bagaimana ideologi meritokrasi memperdalam fragmentasi sosial dengan mengabaikan keterbatasan struktural dalam pencapaian individu. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ketergantungan Indonesia pada kebijakan pendidikan berbasis merit cenderung merugikan komunitas pedesaan dan kelompok tertinggal, sementara kekecewaan yang muncul memperkuat narasi populis yang menentang elit politik dan pendidikan. Sebagai alternatif, prinsip *kebaikan bersama* yang ditawarkan Sandel memberikan kerangka normatif untuk reformasi, dengan menekankan solidaritas, tanggung jawab kolektif, dan kesejahteraan umum. Dengan menerapkan prinsip ini dalam kebijakan sosial dan pendidikan di Indonesia, artikel ini menyoroti jalan menuju pengurangan ketimpangan, meredam ketidakpuasan populis, serta memperkuat kohesi demokratis.

**Kata-kata Kunci:** ketidaksetaraan sosial, populisme, Michael Sandel, meritokrasi, kebaikan bersama

## INTRODUCTION

Meritocracy is a system that evaluates individuals based on their achievements, aiming to ensure a fair distribution of opportunities and rewards. This system has long been regarded as a fundamental principle in fostering equal opportunities in modern society. However, over time, various critiques of meritocracy have emerged. One of the most prominent critics is Michael Sandel, a political and moral philosopher, who, in his book *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (2020), argues that meritocracy exacerbates inequality and deepens social frag-

mentation.<sup>1</sup> Sandel contends that the ideology of meritocracy overlooks misfortune—such as class background, access to resources, or inherited disadvantages—and instead assumes that success is solely the product of individual effort. Consequently, those who succeed often feel entitled and superior, while those who fail internalize shame and humiliation.<sup>2</sup> In contexts like Indonesia, this narrative reinforces both economic and educational stratification, while also feeding populist movements that mobilize resentment against the so-called “winners” of the meritocratic system.

The key questions underlying this study are: Does Indonesia’s meritocratic system genuinely foster social equality, or does it entrench existing inequalities? How does meritocracy intersect with populism and educational disparity in shaping social solidarity and political legitimacy? And to what extent can Sandel’s critique provide new insights for building a fairer and more inclusive society in Indonesia?<sup>3</sup> This study employs a qualitative approach with a critical theory analysis, examining the works of Michael Sandel, particularly *The Tyranny of Merit*, alongside various related literature on meritocracy and social inequality.<sup>4</sup> The research will analyze the impact of meritocracy on social and economic structures and compare Sandel’s theory with the social reality in Indonesia. Secondary data obtained from books, articles, and relevant reports will be analyzed

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- 1 Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What’s Become of the Common Good?*, 1st ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020); Fred Matthews, “The Tyranny of Merit: What’s Become of the Common Good? Michael J. Sandel, 2021.” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 39, no. 4 (2022): 741–43, <https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.12589>.
  - 2 Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What’s Become of the Common Good?*; E. Ziliotti, “Social Meritocracy and Unjust Social Hierarchies: Three Proposals to Limit Meritocracy’s Erosion of Social Cooperation,” *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 17, no. 4 (2024): 581–95, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40647-024-00400-9>.
  - 3 Jonathan J.B. Mijs, “The Unfulfillable Promise of Meritocracy: Three Lessons and Their Implications for Justice in Education,” *Social Justice Research* 29, no. 1 (2015): 14–34, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11211-014-0228-0>; J.J.B. Mijs, “Merit and Resentment: How to Tackle the Tyranny of Merit,” *Theory and Research in Education* 20, no. 2 (2022): 173–81, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14778785221106837>.
  - 4 Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What’s Become of the Common Good?*; Mijs, “Merit and Resentment: How to Tackle the Tyranny of Merit.”

descriptively and critically to identify tensions and injustices arising from the meritocratic system.<sup>5</sup>

Several previous studies have examined meritocracy and the critiques leveled against it. In his book *The Tyranny of Merit*, Sandel challenges meritocracy as a system that does not create equality but instead exacerbates social inequality. According to Sandel, meritocracy merely reinforces social stratification based on talent and effort, which, in reality, are influenced by unjust external factors such as social and economic background.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, research by Nasir and Anuragini (2023) highlights how merit continues to serve as the foundation for reservation policies in India, despite often neglecting existing structural inequalities, thereby diminishing the true meaning of equal opportunity.<sup>7</sup>

Another study by Ziliotti (2024) explores how meritocracy, while seemingly promoting equality, in practice creates an unjust social hierarchy and weakens social solidarity by failing to accommodate marginalized groups within society.<sup>8</sup> Chen and Bland (2022) further link the rise of populism to growing dissatisfaction with the meritocratic elite, who are perceived as no longer representing the interests of the majority. Research in Indonesia (Tan & Kosat, 2024) also shows that meritocratic values in education reinforce structural inequalities, allowing only those with privileged backgrounds to thrive. Taken together, these findings suggest that the ideal of equal opportunity often masks deep structural inequities – an observation highly relevant to Indonesia’s challenges of widening educational disparity and rising populist sentiments.<sup>9</sup>

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5 A. Nasir and P. Anuragini, “Of Merit and Supreme Court: A Tale of Imagined Superiority and Artificial Thresholds,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 58, no. 11 (2023); Ziliotti, “Social Meritocracy and Unjust Social Hierarchies: Three Proposals to Limit Meritocracy’s Erosion of Social Cooperation.”

6 Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What’s Become of the Common Good?*

7 Nasir and Anuragini, “Of Merit and Supreme Court: A Tale of Imagined Superiority and Artificial Thresholds.”

8 Ziliotti, “Social Meritocracy and Unjust Social Hierarchies: Three Proposals to Limit Meritocracy’s Erosion of Social Cooperation.”

9 V. Chen and T. B. Bland, “Power, Populism, and a Policy of Grace: Moral Perspectives in The Tyranny of Merit and Cut Loose,” *Theory and Research in Education* 20, no. 2

Most of these studies suggest that while meritocracy promises equality, it often intensifies existing inequalities and sustains a social hierarchy that is more exclusive than inclusive. These critiques form the foundation for this research, which seeks to further explore how meritocracy contributes to social inequality in Indonesia and to propose alternative, more equitable solutions based on social solidarity.

This article is grounded in distributive justice theory and meritocracy theory. Michael Sandel argues that meritocracy creates injustice by emphasizing individuals' success as solely the result of their effort and talent, without considering the social background that influences their achievements. Additionally, distributive justice theory, as developed by John Rawls, will be employed to compare the meritocratic system with a more inclusive concept of social justice, which prioritizes real equality of opportunity.<sup>10</sup>

This study offers a novel contribution by delving deeper into the impact of meritocracy on social inequality in Indonesia, using Michael Sandel's critical perspective. Furthermore, this analysis will propose an alternative, more just and inclusive social system—one that not only values individual achievement but also recognizes collective contributions and ensures equal access for all social groups.

This study will analyze several key issues related to criticisms of meritocracy and its impact on social inequality. The analysis proceeds in three stages. *First*, it examines Sandel's central critique that meritocracy, rather than combating inequality, intensifies it by disregarding structural misfortunes. *Second*, it investigates how meritocracy undermines social solidarity, contributing to feelings of alienation and resentment that fuel populism in Indonesia. *Third*, it explores Sandel's concept of the *common good* as a normative framework for reimagining Indonesia's social and educational policies. By situating Sandel's ideas within Indonesia's realities,

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(2022): 159-72, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14778785221109067>.

10 Michael J. Sandel, "Populism, Liberalism, and Democracy," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 44, no. 4 (2018): 353-59, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453718757888>; Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?*

this study offers a novel perspective that not only critiques meritocracy but also highlights pathways toward a more just and inclusive social order.

## DISCUSSION

### THE CONCEPT OF MERITOCRACY IN MODERN SOCIETY

Meritocracy, as an ideology that assesses individual success based on ability and effort, has long been deeply embedded in modern society. This system is portrayed as a mechanism that enables individuals to achieve success through hard work and talent, without being influenced by external factors such as family background or social connections.<sup>11</sup> However, despite its image as a fair system, meritocracy has attracted widespread criticism, particularly for its close connection to social inequality.

Meritocracy is frequently regarded as a pathway to social justice and upward mobility under the assumption that hard work will yield proportional rewards. However, evidence suggests that faith in this system can hinder the identification and resolution of deeper societal inequalities. For instance, research by Darnon et al. (2017) found that students who strongly believe in meritocracy in educational settings are less likely to support redistributive policies or engage in efforts to reduce inequality.<sup>12</sup> This implies that the ideology of meritocracy can paradoxically perpetuate disparities rather than resolve them. Similarly, Mijs (2019) reveals that as income inequality grows, belief in meritocracy tends to increase, thereby legitimizing rather than challenging unjust social hierarchies.<sup>13</sup>

In Indonesia, these dynamics are particularly visible in the education sector. Admission into prestigious universities is formally based on standardized testing—a quintessential meritocratic mechanism. Howev-

11 Michael J. Sandel, "Populism, Liberalism, and Democracy".

12 Céline Darnon, Anniq Smeding, and Sandrine Redersdorff, "Belief in School Meritocracy as an Ideological Barrier to the Promotion of Equality," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 48, no. 4 (2017): 523–34, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2347>.

13 Jonathan J. B. Mijs, "The Paradox of Inequality: Income Inequality and Belief in Meritocracy Go Hand in Hand," *Socio-Economic Review* 19, no. 1 (2019): 7–35, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mwy051>.

er, students from wealthier families often enjoy disproportionate advantages, such as access to high-quality preparatory courses, private tutors, and digital resources. Meanwhile, students from rural or economically disadvantaged regions, including Nusa Tenggara, Maluku, and Papua, face structural barriers that limit their chances of success in the same system. What is presented as a neutral and merit-based competition thus in practice reproduces inequality. Sandel's critique is relevant here: the system treats achievement as solely the product of effort and talent, while ignoring the social and economic backgrounds that significantly shape educational outcomes.

Additionally, meritocracy is often viewed as an ideology that reinforces social hierarchies. Seron et al. (2018) describe meritocracy as a system that shields conventional institutional practices from criticism, ensuring that existing social structures remain intact.<sup>14</sup> Tan and Kosat (2024) in the Indonesian context, argue that education embodies a "monocentric meritocracy," where those who already have advantages continue to dominate academic achievements.<sup>15</sup> This leads to unequal representation of students from marginalized areas and contributes to the perception that success is limited to a narrow elite. In practice, this not only undermines inclusivity but also fuels resentment among those excluded from the system.

From a psychological perspective, meritocracy also exacerbates inequality. Kuppens et al. (2018) found that individuals with higher education levels tend to look down on those with lower educational attainment, further widening the social gap between different classes.<sup>16</sup> In Indonesia,

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14 Carroll Seron et al., "I Am Not a Feminist, But...: Hegemony of a Meritocratic Ideology and the Limits of Critique Among Women in Engineering," *Work and Occupations* 45, no. 2 (2018): 131–67, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888418759774>.

15 Peter K. W. Tan and Oktovianus Kosat, "Meritocracy, the Reproduction of Inequality, and the Academic Scandal in Indonesia: Philosophical Perspective of Michael Sandel," *Indonesian Journal of Educational Research and Review* 7, no. 1 (2024): 154–68, <https://doi.org/10.23887/ijerr.v7i1.66253>.

16 Toon Kuppens et al., "Educationism and the Irony of Meritocracy: Negative Attitudes of Higher Educated People Towards the Less Educated," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 76 (2018): 429–47, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2017.11.001>.

such attitudes manifest in the stigma against those labeled as “kurang pintar” (less smart) or “pemalas” (lazy), particularly when they fail in standardized assessments. Similarly, Batruch et al. (2022) demonstrated that belief in meritocracy within educational institutions can reinforce social inequality, particularly among those who have already benefited from the education system.<sup>17</sup> This resonates strongly with Sandel’s point that meritocracy not only breeds arrogance among the successful but also humiliation among those left behind.

Although meritocracy is often seen as an ideal system for achieving equality, in reality, it tends to exacerbate inequality. Michael Young, who first introduced the term “meritocracy” in his satirical work *The Rise of Meritocracy* (Bosco, 2019), originally coined the term to critique rather than endorse the idea, which has since gained widespread acceptance.<sup>18</sup> Sandel, in *The Tyranny of Merit* (Matthews, 2022), asserts that meritocracy not only fosters arrogance among the successful but also despair among those who fail.<sup>19</sup> In the Indonesian context, this critique helps explain why resentment toward elites has fueled populist movements. Populist leaders often tap into the frustrations of those excluded by the education system or marginalized in the job market, presenting themselves as champions of the “ordinary people” against a meritocratic elite.

Moreover, Zhang (2024) observes, even systems claiming to provide fair opportunities often fail to identify true talent, privileging performance and credentials over actual potential.<sup>20</sup> This is evident in Indonesia’s credential-based bureaucracy and political recruitment, where degrees from prestigious universities are overvalued, while the contributions of com-

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17 Anatolia Batruch et al., “Belief in School Meritocracy and the Legitimization of Social and Income Inequality,” *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 14, no. 5 (2022): 621–35, <https://doi.org/10.1177/19485506221111017>.

18 Luigi Bosco, “Football, Cartoon and the Myth of Meritocracy,” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 9, no. 4 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.30845/ijhss.v9n4p9>.

19 Matthews, “The Tyranny of Merit: What’s Become of the Common Good? Michael J. Sandel, 2021.”

20 Tong Zhang, “The Illusion of Meritocracy,” *Social Science Information* 63, no. 1 (2024): 114–28, <https://doi.org/10.1177/05390184241230406>.



munity leaders, local innovators, or vocationally skilled workers are undervalued. Such practices deepen inequality and weaken social cohesion, echoing Sandel's warning about the corrosive effects of meritocracy on the common good.

In short, Sandel's critique is highly relevant for understanding Indonesia's challenges. Meritocracy, while claiming fairness, reproduces educational inequality, fosters elitism, and feeds populist resentment. By contextualizing Sandel's arguments within Indonesia's social and political realities, it becomes clear that the promise of equal opportunity remains largely illusory, and without reform, meritocracy risks reinforcing exclusion rather than enabling justice.

### MICHAEL SANDEL'S CRITIQUE OF MERITOCRACY

Michael Sandel's critique of meritocracy, primarily articulated in *The Tyranny of Merit*, examines the moral and social implications of a system that ostensibly rewards individual talent and effort. Sandel argues that although meritocracy appears fair, it often exacerbates social divisions and fosters a sense of humiliation among those who fail within its framework. He contends that meritocracy reinforces the belief that success is entirely a product of individual merit, without acknowledging the structural inequalities that influence personal outcomes.<sup>21</sup>

One of Sandel's central arguments is that meritocracy cultivates a sense of arrogance among the successful, who tend to view their achievements as purely the result of their own efforts. At the same time, it generates shame and resentment among those who struggle but fail to succeed.<sup>22</sup> According to Sandel, this dynamic worsens social tensions, as those who do not succeed often feel marginalized and blamed for their

21 Tan and Kosat, "Meritocracy, the Reproduction of Inequality"; Otto G N Madung, "Krisis Demokrasi dan Tirani Meritokrasi Menurut Michael Sandel," *Jurnal Ledalero* 19, no. 2 (2020): 127, <https://doi.org/10.31385/jl.v19i2.212.127-144>.

22 Andrew T. W. Hung, "A Case for Communitarian Meritocracy: A Critical Engagement With Michael Sandel," *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40647-023-00375-z>; Jonathan J B Mijs, "Merit and <i>Ressentiment</i>: How to Tackle the Tyranny of Merit," *Theory and Research in Education* 20, no. 2 (2022): 173-81, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14778785221106837>.

circumstances. His critique highlights how meritocratic ideology can obscure the reality of social inequality, shaping a societal narrative that justifies disparities in wealth and opportunity as the outcome of individual effort rather than systemic factors.<sup>23</sup>

This critique is highly relevant to Indonesia, where educational and political structures are deeply influenced by meritocratic ideals. In education, for example, access to top universities is determined largely by standardized examinations. Formally, these exams embody the principle of equal opportunity; yet in practice, students from privileged families can afford private tutoring, intensive preparatory classes, and advanced technology, while disadvantaged students—particularly in rural and eastern regions—compete with fewer resources. As Sandel observes, such systems allow winners to attribute their success entirely to their own effort, while the failures of others are perceived as personal shortcomings rather than products of structural inequality. This dynamic fuels not only educational disparity but also the stigmatization of the poor, reinforcing a social hierarchy where privilege is legitimized under the banner of merit.

Sandel also criticizes the educational system for perpetuating values that exacerbate inequality. He asserts that the competitive nature of academic institutions disproportionately benefits those with access to resources, disadvantaging students from less privileged backgrounds (Tan & Kosat, 2024; Mijs, 2015). In Indonesia, this can be seen in the unequal distribution of educational infrastructure between urban and rural areas, which results in what Tan and Kosat call a “monocentric meritocracy.” Such a framework not only reproduces inequality but also creates fertile ground for resentment. This resentment often finds political expression through populism, as groups excluded from educational privilege rally behind leaders who claim to represent “the ordinary people” against a distant elite.<sup>24</sup> In this way, Sandel’s analysis of how meritocracy generates

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23 Madung, “Krisis Demokrasi dan Tirani Meritokrasi”; Tan and Kosat, “Meritocracy, the Reproduction of Inequality”

24 Tan and Kosat, “Meritocracy, the Reproduction of Inequality”; Mijs, “Merit and Resentment: How to Tackle the Tyranny of Merit.”

social alienation provides a valuable lens for understanding the populist dynamics of Indonesian politics.

Furthermore, Sandel's proposal of a "qualified lottery" as a solution to meritocratic injustice – though controversial – invites reflection on Indonesian debates about affirmative action and access to higher education. Policies such as special quotas for students from underdeveloped regions or for marginalized communities reflect a similar concern: how to mitigate systemic disadvantages within an education system dominated by meritocratic logic. Critics such as Lai (2023) argue that mechanisms like lotteries may disrupt young people's identity formation, Indonesia's efforts to balance merit-based selection with affirmative measures highlight the relevance of Sandel's broader concern with fairness and solidarity.<sup>25</sup>

Beyond these specific policy implications, Sandel's work raises broader questions about the role of community and solidarity in societies governed by meritocracy. He argues that an overemphasis on individual achievement undermines the collective bonds essential for democratic health.<sup>26</sup> This perspective resonates strongly in Indonesia, where the success narrative of the "educated elite" often contrasts sharply with the lived realities of the majority who face precarious labor markets, limited social mobility, and restricted access to higher education. Such dissonance not only weakens social cohesion but also fuels populist narratives that pit "ordinary people" against the so-called meritocratic elite.

Sandel's critique of meritocracy is deeply relevant for Indonesia. It explains how educational inequality reproduces social stratification, how meritocratic ideology fosters resentment among the marginalized, and

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25 Yukou Lai, "A Critique of the Tyranny of Merit From a Psychological Perspective: Would Randomness to Success Reduce Distributive Injustice or Induce Psychological Existential Crisis for Adolescents?," *Research and Advances in Education* 2, no. 10 (2023): 30–35, <https://doi.org/10.56397/rae.2023.10.03>.

26 Petrus Tan, "Tirani Meritokrasi dan Reimajinasi Solidaritas: Sebuah Kajian Berdasarkan Perspektif Michael Sandel," *Jurnal Ledalero* 22, no. 1 (2023): 1, <https://doi.org/10.31385/jl.v22i1.332.1-19>; Robert L Tsai, "Can Sandel Dethrone Meritocracy? Comment on M. Sandel's *The Tyranny of Merit*," *American Journal of Law and Equality* 1 (2021): 70–80, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ajle\\_a\\_00001](https://doi.org/10.1162/ajle_a_00001).

how these dynamics feed populist sentiments. By situating Sandel's critique within the Indonesian context, it becomes clear that the challenges of inequality and populism are not incidental but systemic outcomes of a meritocratic order that privileges winners while humiliating losers.

## THE IMPACT OF MERITOCRACY ON SOCIAL INEQUALITY

The impact of meritocracy on social inequality is a complex issue that has garnered significant attention in contemporary sociological and psychological research. Meritocracy, often perceived as a fair system where individuals achieve success based on their abilities and efforts, paradoxically contributes to the persistence of social inequality. This paradox can be explained through three interrelated dimensions: beliefs about meritocracy, structural barriers, and the psychological effects experienced by individuals across different social classes.

One key aspect of meritocracy is the belief in its principles, which can, in fact, exacerbate social inequality. Darnon et al. (2017) found that belief in **school** meritocracy (BSM) can widen achievement gaps based on socioeconomic status (SES), as low-SES students often subscribe to meritocratic ideals despite their lived experiences contradicting such beliefs.<sup>27</sup> This harmful belief can create an illusion of control among disadvantaged students, who may attribute their failures to personal shortcomings rather than recognizing the systemic barriers they face. Mijs (2019) further argues that as income inequality increases, so does the belief in meritocracy, which obscures the structural processes shaping life outcomes.<sup>28</sup> This creates a paradox in which individuals are convinced that their social position is a result of personal merit, even though deep-rooted systemic inequalities persist.

This dynamic is strikingly relevant in Indonesia's education system. The highly competitive university entrance process, for example, is widely considered a neutral arena of fair competition. Yet access to elite insti-

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<sup>27</sup> Darnon et al., "Where There Is a Will, There Is a Way"

<sup>28</sup> Mijs, "The Paradox of Inequality"

tutions is far easier for students from urban, middle-class families with access to tutoring, internet technology, and parental support. Meanwhile, students from rural or economically disadvantaged areas often lack even basic educational infrastructure. What appears to be merit-based selection thus reproduces inequality, affirming Sandel's observation that meritocracy masks structural barriers and interprets outcomes as purely the result of talent and effort.

Education also serves as a major site where meritocratic values reproduce social stratification. Betz and Kayser (2017) note that children perceive educational outcomes as a key determinant of future job status and income, which in turn influences social stratification.<sup>29</sup> This perspective can lead to a narrow focus on individual achievement, overlooking the broader socioeconomic context that shapes educational success. Jin and Ball (2019) argue that meritocracy functions as a new form of class dominance, where the "best and brightest" ascend to the top while others are left behind, further entrenching existing social hierarchies.<sup>30</sup> In Indonesia, this results in the concentration of economic and political power among a narrow group of highly credentialed elites, while marginalized communities face systemic exclusion. Sandel's critique resonates here: meritocracy cultivates arrogance among winners and despair among losers, making inequality not just material but also moral.

The language of meritocracy often aligns with neoliberal narratives, framing social mobility as an individual project without acknowledging structural inequities. Nyíró and Durst (2021) contend that this narrative positions social mobility as a solution to historical and social problems, ultimately masking the reality of class- and race-based inequalities.<sup>31</sup> This

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29 Tanja Betz and Laura B Kayser, "Children and Society," *American Behavioral Scientist* 61, no. 2 (2017): 186–203, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764216689121>.

30 Jin Jin and Stephen J. Ball, "Meritocracy, Social Mobility and a New Form of Class Domination," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 41, no. 1 (2019): 64–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2019.1665496>.

31 Zsanna Nyíró and Judit Durst, "Racialisation Rules: The Effect of Educational Upward Mobility on Habitus," *Szociológiai Szemle* 31, no. 3 (2021): 21–50, <https://doi.org/10.51624/szocszemle.2021.3.2>.

view is supported by Heuer et al. (2020), who argue that widespread acceptance of meritocratic beliefs legitimizes social inequality, as individuals are more likely to perceive income disparities as fair outcomes of effort and personal achievement.<sup>32</sup>

The psychological impact of meritocracy is equally significant. Garrison et al. (2020) developed the American Meritocracy Myth Stress Scale, which measures the psychological stress experienced by students in the context of meritocratic ideology. This stress arises from the dissonance between dominant meritocratic ideals and lived experiences, especially for those who encounter systemic barriers to success.<sup>33</sup> In Indonesia, this is reflected in the growing mental health challenges faced by students under high-stakes testing regimes. For many students from less privileged backgrounds, repeated failures in national examinations or university entrance tests translate into humiliation and diminished self-worth. This reproduces precisely the cycle of arrogance and despair described by Sandel: those who succeed attribute it to their merit, while those who fail internalize their exclusion as a moral failing.

Sandel's critique of meritocracy provides a valuable lens for understanding how inequality is perpetuated in Indonesia. The belief in meritocracy legitimizes educational and economic stratification, masks systemic barriers, and generates psychological harm among marginalized groups. By situating Sandel's ideas within Indonesia's context, it becomes evident that meritocracy not only sustains social inequality but also weakens the bonds of solidarity necessary for a just and inclusive society.

## POPULISM AND SOCIAL RADICALIZATION AS CONSEQUENCES OF MERITOCRACY

The relationship between meritocracy and social radicalization, particularly in the context of populism, has become a critical area of study in

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32 Jan-Ocko Heuer et al., "Legitimizing Inequality," *Comparative Sociology* 19, no. 4–5 (2020): 542–84, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15691330-bja10017>.

33 Yunkyoung L. Garrison, Alexander Rice, and William M. Liu, "The American Meritocracy Myth Stress: Scale Development and Initial Validation," *The Counseling Psychologist* 49, no. 1 (2020): 80–105, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000020962072>.

contemporary social sciences. While meritocracy appears to promote fairness and equal opportunities, this system can instead exacerbate social divisions and accelerate radicalization by fostering perceptions of injustice and alienation among those who feel marginalized.

One of the key aspects of meritocracy is its role in shaping perceptions of social mobility. Day and Fiske (2016) argue that when individuals perceive social mobility as highly restricted, they become more likely to question the legitimacy of the meritocratic system. This dissatisfaction can lead to feelings of betrayal and resentment, particularly among those who have worked hard but remain in disadvantaged positions.<sup>34</sup> Such sentiments can fuel populist movements, as individuals seek ways to challenge the status quo and demand systemic change. Batruch et al. (2022) expand on this idea by demonstrating that belief in meritocracy within educational institutions can legitimize social and income inequalities, reinforcing a cycle in which those at the bottom feel increasingly alienated and voiceless.<sup>35</sup>

This dynamic resonates strongly with the Indonesian context. Over the past two decades, Indonesia has witnessed the rise of populist leaders who capitalize on widespread resentment toward an educated and political elite. In electoral campaigns, populist rhetoric often emphasizes the divide between *wong cilik* (ordinary people) and *kaum elit* (the privileged class). The success of this rhetoric cannot be separated from frustrations with a meritocratic system that seems to reward only those with access to urban resources, elite education, and economic privilege. Many citizens who feel excluded from educational and economic mobility turn to populist figures who promise recognition, justice, and the dismantling of elitist structures. Sandel's critique of meritocracy is particularly relevant here: he shows how the ideology of merit creates arrogance among the winners

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34 Martin V. Day and Susan T. Fiske, "Movin' on Up? How Perceptions of Social Mobility Affect Our Willingness to Defend the System," *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 8, no. 3 (2016): 267-74, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550616678454>.

35 Batruch et al., "Belief in School Meritocracy"

while humiliating the losers, thereby deepening social resentment that fuels populist politics.

Furthermore, the myth of meritocracy often obscures structural barriers that hinder real social mobility. Lardier et al. (2017) highlight how marginalized youth are denied access to the cultural and social capital needed for advancement, leading them to internalize failure as a personal fault.<sup>36</sup> In Indonesia, this is evident in the uneven distribution of educational opportunities between urban and rural areas. Students from Jakarta or Yogyakarta benefit from high-quality schools, tutoring institutions, and digital access, while those in remote provinces often struggle with limited infrastructure. Yet, when these students fail to compete in national examinations, the dominant narrative attributes their shortcomings to lack of ability or effort. Mijs (2019) argues, belief in meritocracy grows even as inequality deepens, masking structural injustices and redirecting frustrations toward personal blame.<sup>37</sup> This mismatch between belief and reality intensifies resentment and creates fertile ground for populist mobilization.

The psychological impact of meritocracy also plays a significant role in fostering populist sentiments. Pickett and Wilkinson (2015) argue that income inequality is closely linked to social cohesion and public health, demonstrating that societies with high levels of inequality tend to experience greater social tensions and radicalization.<sup>38</sup> This issue is further exacerbated by the perception that meritocratic systems favor the wealthy and well-connected, leading to growing anger and frustration among those who feel left behind. Sudbrack (2023) emphasizes that perceptions of injustice—particularly within meritocratic frameworks—can push individuals toward populist movements, as they feel compelled to unite against

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36 David T. Lardier et al., "Merit in Meritocracy: Uncovering the Myth of Exceptionality and Self-Reliance Through the Voices of Urban Youth of Color," *Education and Urban Society* 51, no. 4 (2017): 474–500, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124517727583>.

37 Mijs, "The Paradox of Inequality"

38 Kate E. Pickett and Richard G. Wilkinson, "Income Inequality and Health: A Causal Review," *Social Science & Medicine* 128 (2015): 316–26, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.12.031>.



economic elites perceived as unfairly advantaged.<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, belief in meritocracy fosters a stark divide between “winners” and “losers”, in which those who succeed are seen as deserving of their status, while those who fail are labeled as lazy or incompetent. Roex et al. (2018) illustrate how this binary categorization can worsen social tensions, as individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds often internalize these meritocratic beliefs, leading them to reject the existing system.<sup>40</sup> In Indonesia, this binary categorization is evident in the way urban-educated elites are celebrated as the future of the nation, while rural communities and the urban poor are often portrayed as “tertinggal” (left behind). Such stigmatization intensifies feelings of exclusion and motivates support for radical or populist political movements that promise to disrupt the current order.

In this sense, Sandel’s critique provides a compelling framework for understanding the rise of populism in Indonesia. By exposing how meritocracy breeds hubris among winners and humiliation among losers, Sandel helps explain why large segments of Indonesian society gravitate toward populist leaders who offer recognition and dignity to those excluded from the meritocratic game. Populism in Indonesia, therefore, is not merely a reaction to economic inequality but also a response to the moral and psychological injuries inflicted by a meritocratic order that legitimizes privilege while marginalizing the majority.

### **AN ALTERNATIVE TO MERITOCRACY: SANDEL’S CONCEPT OF THE “COMMON GOOD”**

Michael Sandel’s critique of meritocracy, as discussed in his book *The Tyranny of Merit: What’s Become of the Common Good?*, offers a compelling

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39 Lucas Sudbrack, “Meritocracy, Unfairness, and the Directions of Anger,” *Revista Debates* 17, no. 1 (2023): 63–84, <https://doi.org/10.22456/1982-5269.129695>.

40 Karlijn L. Roex, Tim Huijts, and Inge Sieben, “Attitudes Towards Income Inequality: ‘Winners’ Versus ‘Losers’ of the Perceived Meritocracy,” *Acta Sociologica* 62, no. 1 (2018): 47–63, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001699317748340>.

alternative to the meritocratic ideology that dominates contemporary society. Sandel argues that the obsession with meritocracy not only worsens social inequality but also undermines the common good by fostering a culture of individualism and competition at the expense of community and solidarity.<sup>41</sup>

Sandel's central thesis posits that meritocracy, despite its appearance of fairness, often cultivates a sense of entitlement among the successful and humiliation among those who fail. This dynamic creates social divisions, as those who succeed tend to perceive their achievements as solely the result of their own efforts—disregarding the structural advantages that may have facilitated their success.<sup>42</sup> Consequently, the meritocratic narrative perpetuates social stratification, as individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may internalize feelings of inadequacy and failure, leading to cycles of exclusion.<sup>43</sup>

As an alternative to meritocracy, Sandel proposes a focus on the common good, which emphasizes the importance of community, solidarity, and collective responsibility. According to Sandel, a just society cannot be achieved merely by maximizing individual utility or protecting personal freedoms; instead, it requires a shared understanding of what constitutes a good life.<sup>44</sup> This perspective aligns with communitarian principles, which prioritize the role of communities in shaping individual identity and values.<sup>45</sup> By fostering a sense of togetherness and mutual responsibility, Sandel believes that societies can better address the inequalities perpetuated by meritocracy.

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41 Kenneth Oldfield, "Sandel, M.J. (2020) the Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good? Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.," *Journal of Working-Class Studies* 7, no. 1 (2022): 57–60, <https://doi.org/10.13001/jwcs.v7i1.7251>.

42 Oldfield, "Sandel, M.J. (2020) the Tyranny of Merit".

43 M. J. Sandel and J. Muhoza, "In Conversation with Michael Sandel on World Philosophy Day 2021 in Tanzania," *Utafiti: Journal of African Perspectives* 17, no. 1 (2022): 13–22, <https://doi.org/10.1163/26836408-15020055>.

44 Greg Latemore, "COVID and the Common Good," *Philosophy of Management* 20, no. 3 (2020): 257–69, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40926-020-00154-w>.

45 Mai T. H. Lien et al., "Michael Sandel's Conception of Community," *Asian Journal of Education and Social Studies*, 2022, 40–47, <https://doi.org/10.9734/ajess/2022/v33i4715>.

Furthermore, Sandel's critique extends to the education system, which he argues has become a battleground for meritocratic competition. He highlights how the emphasis on credentials and academic achievements fosters a culture of elitism, where graduates feel superior to those without degrees, further alienating individuals who do not fit the meritocratic ideal.<sup>46</sup> Credentialism, as Sandel describes it, acts as a form of bias that weakens social cohesion and fails to recognize the diverse contributions individuals make to society.

Sandel's call to reimagine the common good is also linked to the need for a more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities. He argues that policies should not only reward individual accomplishments but should also consider the broader social context that influences success.<sup>47</sup> This approach advocates for systemic changes that address the root causes of inequality rather than merely treating its symptoms.

### **APPLYING THE PRINCIPLES OF THE COMMON GOOD IN SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL POLICIES IN INDONESIA**

In the Indonesian context, applying Michael Sandel's principles of the common good offers a more inclusive and equitable alternative for designing social and educational policies. Based on Sandel's critique of meritocracy—which highlights the need for a community-centered approach—policy-making should not focus solely on individual achievement but should also consider collective well-being. This vision provides a useful framework for Indonesia, where educational inequality and populist resentment illustrate the limits of meritocracy.

One of the most concrete ways to implement the *common good* in Indonesia is through educational reform. At present, Indonesia's education system still privileges individual achievement, measured through standardized testing and credentialism, often at the expense of disadvantaged students. Sandel's critique suggests that such systems must be rebalanced by prioritizing solidarity and inclusion. A collaborative and participato-

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46 Oldfield, "Sandel, M.J. (2020) the Tyranny of Merit"

47 Sandel and Muhoza, "In Conversation with Michael Sandel"

ry policy model, as suggested by Suyuthi et al. (2023), aligns well with Sandel's emphasis on community. During the COVID-19 pandemic, participatory approaches helped reduce disparities and ensured that diverse voices were included in decision-making.<sup>48</sup> By involving teachers, parents, students, and communities, Indonesia can build an education system that reflects social diversity and promotes cooperation rather than competition.

This collaborative model not only addresses inequities but also nurtures civic values. In Sandel's terms, education must serve as a school of citizenship, where students learn empathy, responsibility, and solidarity. Policies that emphasize collective achievement over narrow academic rankings help dismantle the arrogance–humiliation cycle that meritocracy creates. In this way, educational policy becomes a practical expression of the *common good*.

Additionally, integrating technology-based learning models, such as blended learning, which combines in-person and online education, can enhance student motivation and engagement. Sigit et al. (2022) argue that blended learning makes education more accessible, engaging, and effective for all students, regardless of their socioeconomic background. This approach supports the principle of the common good by ensuring that educational opportunities are available to everyone, thereby promoting equity in educational attainment.<sup>49</sup>

Beyond education, social governance in Indonesia also offers opportunities to embody the *common good*. Arifin et al. (2022) emphasize that accountability and transparency in corporate governance can strengthen

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48 Ahmad Suyuthi, Nurotun Mumtahanah, and Winarto E. Wahyudi, "Collaborative-Participatory Model in Education Policy During a Pandemic: Building Collaboration to Bridge the Gap," *Al-Hayat Journal of Islamic Education* 7, no. 2 (2023): 559, <https://doi.org/10.35723/ajie.v7i2.401>.

49 Cahyo N. Sigit, Muhammad A. Alfani, and Wasis D. Dwiyoogo, "Implementation of Physical Education With Blended Learning Based on Teacher Readiness in Indonesia: Systematic Review," *Journal of Science and Education (Jse)* 3, no. 2 (2022): 69–75, <https://doi.org/10.56003/jse.v3i2.160>.

trust and collaboration between businesses and communities.<sup>50</sup> By embedding social responsibility and public welfare into corporate practices, Indonesia can ensure that economic success contributes to the wider community, not just to privileged groups.

Furthermore, the principles of the common good should be reflected in resource distribution policies. Social policies that support community empowerment in underdeveloped areas and ensure equal opportunities for all social groups to participate in development efforts play a crucial role in creating collective well-being. By implementing more equitable wealth distribution strategies, Indonesia can reduce social inequality and strengthen solidarity among its citizens.

Curriculum reform is another critical domain. Mahfud (2019) highlights the need for continuous evaluation of Islamic education curricula to align with evolving societal needs. From Sandel's perspective, this reform should go beyond technical skills to include values such as cooperation, empathy, and civic responsibility. A character-focused education fosters not just individual excellence but also social cohesion—key ingredients for realizing the *common good*.<sup>51</sup>

Equally important is active community participation in public policy-making. Kusdianto (2023) argues that education should be viewed as a shared responsibility. This aligns directly with Sandel's insistence that democracy flourishes when citizens are actively engaged in shaping the common life.<sup>52</sup> By involving multiple stakeholders, Indonesia can create policies that are not only more inclusive but also more legitimate in the

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50 Antoni L Arifin et al., "Identification and Application of Good Corporate Governance Principles in the Guarantee Industry in Indonesia," *International Journal of Social Science and Business* 6, no. 3 (2022): 316–25, <https://doi.org/10.23887/ijssb.v6i1.44335>.

51 Choirul Mahfud, "Evaluation of Islamic Education Curriculum Policy in Indonesia," *Premiere Educandum Jurnal Pendidikan Dasar Dan Pembelajaran* 9, no. 1 (2019): 34, <https://doi.org/10.25273/pe.v9i1.4016>.

52 Atur A Kusdianto, "Indonesian Perspective Analysis: With a Little Help From Our Friends: Private Fundraising and Public Schools in Philadelphia (Good & Nelson, 2021)," *Papernia - Multidisciplinary Scientific Journal for Innovative Research* 1, no. 2 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.59178/papernia.202301021>.

eyes of the public, thus reducing the populist resentment born out of exclusion.

Ultimately, applying Sandel's principles of the *common good* in Indonesian social and educational policy represents more than a technocratic adjustment—it signifies a moral reorientation. By prioritizing solidarity, collective responsibility, and equitable distribution, Indonesia can counteract the divisive effects of meritocracy. In doing so, policy-making becomes not merely a mechanism for managing resources but a collective endeavor to strengthen democratic bonds and foster an inclusive national community.

## CONCLUSION

This study has shown that Michael Sandel's critique of meritocracy—particularly his argument that it fosters arrogance among winners and humiliation among losers—is crucial for understanding Indonesia's current challenges. While meritocracy is celebrated as a fair system, in practice it legitimizes inequality and erodes social solidarity. In Indonesia, this dynamic is especially visible in the education sector, where reliance on standardized testing and credentialism disadvantages rural and underprivileged students, reinforcing stigma against the poor and perpetuating systemic disparities.

At the same time, the rise of populism in Indonesia reflects a broader backlash against the failures of meritocracy. Populist leaders thrive on resentment toward political and educational elites, who are perceived as monopolizing opportunities and ignoring the struggles of ordinary citizens. Sandel's critique helps explain this phenomenon: when inequality is framed as the outcome of individual merit, those excluded experience not only economic loss but also moral humiliation, fueling populist anger and social polarization.

As an alternative, Sandel's principle of the *common good* offers a framework for reforming Indonesia's social and educational policies. By shifting emphasis from individual achievement to collective responsibility,

ity, Indonesia can design more inclusive education systems, strengthen social solidarity, and reduce inequality. The novelty of this article lies in applying Sandel's critique—largely developed in Western contexts—to Indonesia, showing how it illuminates the intertwined problems of populism and educational inequality, while pointing toward policy pathways that prioritize justice and shared well-being.

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