

Beyond Populism and Plutocracy: Aretocracy as a New Democratic Paradigm

Más allá del Populismo y la Plutocracia: La Aretocracia como Nuevo Paradigma Democrático

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Abstract

Aretocracy is presented as an alternative to the current democratic models, facing the contemporary problems of populism and plutocracy. The purpose of this study is to analyze the potential of Aretocracy as a governance paradigm based on virtue and ethics, proposing a framework to respond to the ethical and structural crises facing modern democracies. Methodologically, a theoretical-analytical approach is adopted, critically reviewing existing literature on democratic theory and applying these concepts to the design of an ethical pre-qualification system for political leaders. The results demonstrate that Aretocracy can offer a viable governance model by integrating ethical criteria into the leader selection process, ensuring that those who hold public office are both morally competent and technically qualified. Furthermore, the study explores how Aretocracy could be implemented in various sociopolitical contexts, fostering a political culture based on excellence and integrity. The conclusions emphasize the need to reform current democratic systems by incorporating mechanisms of ethical pre-qualification to strengthen the legitimacy and efficiency of governments, ensuring that political decisions align with the collective well-being and human rights.

Keywords: democracy, governance, ethics, political leadership

Resumen

La Aretocracia se presenta como una alternativa a los actuales modelos democráticos, enfrentando las problemáticas contemporáneas del populismo y la plutocracia. El propósito de este estudio es analizar el potencial de la Aretocracia como un paradigma de gobernanza basado en la virtud y la ética, proponiendo un marco de respuesta a las crisis éticas y estructurales de las democracias actuales. Metodológicamente, se adopta un enfoque teórico-analítico, revisando críticamente la literatura existente sobre teoría democrática y aplicando estos conceptos al diseño de un sistema de pre-calificación ética para los líderes políticos. Los resultados muestran que la Aretocracia puede ofrecer un modelo viable de gobernanza al integrar criterios éticos en los procesos de selección de líderes, asegurando que aquellos que ocupen cargos públicos sean moralmente competentes y técnicamente calificados. Además, el estudio explora cómo la Aretocracia podría ser implementada en diversos contextos sociopolíticos, fomentando una cultura política basada en la excelencia y la integridad. Las conclusiones subrayan la necesidad de reformar los sistemas democráticos actuales, incorporando mecanismos de pre-calificación ética para fortalecer la legitimidad y eficiencia de los gobiernos, garantizando que las decisiones políticas estén alineadas con el bienestar colectivo y los derechos humanos.

Palabras clave: democracia, gobernanza, ética, liderazgo político.



INTRODUCTION

In today's evolving landscape of governance, democracy, long regarded as the foundation of modern political systems, is confronting significant challenges. The inherent limitations of traditional democratic models have sparked debates about their effectiveness, particularly in light of the rise of plutocracy—rule by the wealthy—and olocracy—mob rule. These distortions threaten the core democratic ideals of fairness and representation. Against this backdrop, the concept of *aretecracy* emerges as a promising alternative, rooted in the principles of ethical excellence and moral virtue. This article explores the foundations of aretecracy, focusing on its distinguishing feature: the pre-qualification process for political representation.

Aretecracy, derived from the Greek *aretē* (excellence) and *kratos* (power or rule), aims to refine democratic governance by integrating a rigorous ethical component. Far from rejecting democracy's core principles, aretecracy enhances them by ensuring that those who hold power are not only elected but are also morally and ethically qualified to lead. This concept responds directly to the weaknesses exposed in contemporary democratic systems, as highlighted in the seminal work “De la Democracia a la Aretecracia” where democracy's evolution and universalization are critiqued. Aretecracy proposes a transformative approach, one that fuses democratic legitimacy with a stringent moral and ethical framework, elevating governance beyond electoral success to a higher standard of virtuous leadership.

At its core, aretecracy challenges the traditional notion that electoral victory alone qualifies one for leadership. It asserts that true democratic governance must also consider the ethical caliber of its leaders. The pre-qualification process, central to aretecracy, involves a deep and comprehensive assessment of candidates' character, decision-making history, and commitment to the common good. This evaluation seeks to ensure that public officials embody virtues such as integrity, justice, and prudence, fostering a governance model rooted in ethical leadership. This article will critically examine the criteria and mechanisms of aretecracy's pre-qualification process, highlighting its potential to create a more ethical and effective form of governance.

Through this analysis, the article aims to shed light on how aretecracy can address the shortcomings of modern democratic systems by promoting leaders who not only possess democratic legitimacy but also exemplify ethical excellence. In doing so, we envision a future where governance is elevated by a steadfast commitment to virtue, offering a promising pathway to more principled and effective leadership in the political arena.

DISCUSSION

1. Impact of Aretecracy Theory Since the Seminal Works' Publication.

As a proponent of the Aretecracy theory, it is with a sense of responsibility that I reflect upon the journey and impact of this concept since its initial presentation. Aretecracy, or Virtuecracy, represents not merely a theoretical framework but a vision for a society where virtue and excellence are central to governance and civic life. The

following examines various academic engagements with this concept and its practical implications, with an emphasis on Álvaro Iriarte-Angarita’s insightful analysis.

The progression of Aretocracy from a foundational idea to a subject of scholarly debate and practical application has been a remarkable journey. The theory has found resonance in various academic fields, reflecting its adaptability and relevance to contemporary challenges. In exploring these engagements, we uncover a tapestry of thoughts that can be grouped into core categories encompassing human rights, ethical structures, and sociopolitical dynamics. We will present below a Matrix of Content Analysis that collects a sample of the core categories.

The sample used for the elaboration of the Matrix of Content Analysis is theoretical, a set of events to which one appeals as corroborative justification for the extension of ideas or interpretative judgments (Seid, 2017). The keyword search was executed through the specialized databases of Redib, Google Scholar, Latindex, Redalyc, Scopus, Scielo, Sciencedirect and Web of Science. These databases yielded 28 scientific papers, of which six were selected that met the criteria defined for selection. According to Arias-Gómez, Villasís-Keever, and Miranda-Novales (2016), the inclusion criteria is defined as the set of particularities of a subject or object that make it part of an investigation. The same authors state that the exclusion criteria refer to all the attributes that alter or change the results. This reason excludes this type of participant from any study.

Table 1. Matrix of Content Analysis

Central Categories	Registration Units	Sampling Units
Political Theory	Challenges for democracy in the new AI and IoT context: towards a new citizenship The risks of majority rule as decision mechanism	Moreno <i>et al.</i> , (2023) Fontana Filho, M. (2022).
Philosophical and Ethical Frameworks	The Aretocracy / Virtuscocracy as a Teleological Objective of the Civil Society of the XXI Century: A Simple and Noble Task of each Citizen Committed to their Own Political Life Aretedemocracy as a system of government in the face of corruption and populism in Colombia.	Iriarte-Angarita, A. (2020). Gutiérrez & Urbina, (2022).
Legal and Sociopolitical Applications	Extrajudicial conciliation and its importance in conflict resolution in the conflict resolution in the Judicial District of Huaraz–2023. Citizen normative management construction for social happiness and peace in Colombia	García & Lino, (2023). Hernández de Velazco <i>et al.</i> , (2020).

Source: Own elaboration, 2023.

From the previous sample, the work of Álvaro Iriarte-Angarita stands out for its singular focus on Aretocracy. This work, from a general perspective, delves into Aretocracy's philosophical underpinnings, drawing from Kantian ethics and existentialism to frame it as a teleological objective for modern civil society. Iriarte-Angarita emphasizes the existentialist element within Aretocracy, where each individual is compelled to develop their own virtue in the context of a broader political and ethical landscape.

One of the most compelling aspects of Iriarte-Angarita's analysis is his emphasis on the existential dimensions of Aretocracy. He posits that the pursuit of virtue and excellence should not be viewed as abstract ideals but as integral to the individual's existential journey. This framing of Aretocracy places the individual at the center of the theory, highlighting the importance of personal moral responsibility in the political sphere. It calls for a reexamination of the role of the citizen, advocating for proactive engagement in the cultivation of personal virtue as a civic duty. This approach resonates with contemporary concerns about the ethical and moral foundations of political systems and positions Aretocracy as a response to these challenges.

Another key aspect of Iriarte-Angarita's work is his exploration of the teleological nature of Aretocracy. He argues that Aretocracy serves as a guiding principle for the development of civil society in the 21st century, aligning individual goals with societal progress. This teleological perspective is grounded in the belief that the pursuit of virtue and excellence can lead to a more enlightened and responsible form of citizenship. Iriarte-Angarita's analysis challenges the traditional view of political engagement, suggesting that the development of a virtuous society is a continuous process that requires active participation and commitment from each individual.

Lastly, Iriarte-Angarita's interpretation of Aretocracy is significant for its practical implications. He bridges the gap between philosophical theory and real-world application, suggesting ways in which Aretocracy can inform policy and governance. This aspect of his work is crucial in demonstrating the relevance of Aretocracy to contemporary societal issues. By applying the principles of virtue and excellence to governance and public policy, Iriarte-Angarita illustrates how Aretocracy can be a transformative force in addressing issues of social justice, equity, and human rights. His perspective provides a hopeful and pragmatic path forward, advocating for a society where ethical leadership and responsible citizenship are the cornerstones of governance.

1.1. Relevance of Aretocracy at the United Nations

The integration of the Aretocracy theory into discussions at the United Nations represents a significant milestone in its evolution. The presentation by [CLIPSAS \(2020\)](#), a non-governmental organization with consultative status at the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), underscores the theory's potential as a democratic method to guarantee Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This development is a testament to the theory's growing influence and its perceived utility in shaping sustainable and ethical governance models on a global scale.

In the statement presented by CLIPSAS, “The Aretecracy: A democratic method to guarantee the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG),” Aretecracy is positioned as an effective response to the challenges posed by populist governments, which are seen as a significant threat to achieving SDGs. The statement emphasizes the need for a democratic, qualified, and legitimate system, where leadership is determined not just by popular vote but also through a process of prior qualification. This process aims to ensure that those in power possess the necessary abilities, skills, ethical qualities, and commitment to human rights, which are crucial for the realization of SDGs. CLIPSAS’s advocacy for aretecratic laws, which would raise the ethical and merit requirements for executive power, reflects a profound understanding of the need for ethical leadership in achieving sustainable development.

0.0.1. Important Aspects of the CLIPSAS Statement

CLIPSAS outlines specific criteria for the pre-qualification process in Aretecracy, such as a judicial, administrative, and disciplinary resume, demonstrable social work, adherence to human rights in public and private actions, academic preparation, experience, and ethical reputation.

These criteria ensure that leaders are not only democratically elected but also adequately equipped to tackle the complex challenges of sustainable development. By proposing these rigorous standards, Aretecracy is presented as a robust framework that can counteract the erratic and unpredictable decision-making often associated with populist regimes.

Aretecracy, as advocated by CLIPSAS, offers a promising and innovative approach to ensuring the achievement of the SDGs. By embedding ethical and meritocratic principles into the fabric of governance, Aretecracy provides a viable solution to the challenges posed by populism and corruption. This approach not only strengthens democratic processes but also aligns them with the global commitment for sustainable development. The introduction of Aretecracy into the discourse at the United Nations marks a pivotal moment, highlighting its potential as a transformative force in guiding humanity towards a more ethical, just, and sustainable future.

1.2. Impact of Aretecracy in the Congress of the Republic of Peru

The recognition and application of the Aretecracy theory in the legislative process of the National Congress of the Republic of Peru marks an interesting development in the practical application of the theory. The reference to Aretecracy by the Commission of Constitution and Regulation of the Peruvian Congress, in the context of evaluating and strengthening the management capabilities of State Ministers, indicates a transition of Aretecracy from an academic concept to a tangible legislative tool.

The Commission of Constitution and Regulation, in its review of bills 0048/2021-CR, 0051/2021-DP, 0055/2021-CR, and 0184/2021-CR, which propose modifications to Law 29158, the Organic Law of the Executive Power, recommended the approval of these projects.

This move supposes the application of Aretocracy in evaluating and defining the qualifications required for ministers of state. By leveraging Aretocracy's principles, the Peruvian Congress aims to ensure that those holding significant government positions are not only legally and democratically appointed but also meet high standards of ethical and professional competence.

The use of Aretocracy by the [Congress of the Republic of Peru \(2021\)](#) to strengthen the capacities of Ministers of State is a pioneering step in the application of this political theory to practical governance. This approach, if fully implemented, can potentially lead to a more ethically sound and effective government, in which leaders are chosen not only on the basis of their political affiliation or popularity, but also on the basis of their proven competence and ethical standing. As Aretocracy continues to influence legislative processes beyond academia, it holds the potential to transform governance structures, promoting a higher level of leadership and accountability in public administration.

2. A path to aretecracy

First, we will review the development of the different expressions of democracy. Then, we will discuss the main contemporary problems of democracy, the descriptive and prescriptive theories of democracy, and finally, we will further explain the theory of aretecracy.

2.1 Development of the different expressions of democracy

Democracy, after its initial period in Greece, went into a long lethargy, especially after the defeat of the Greek polis by Philip II and Alexander the Great, which marked the beginning of the Hellenistic era. This was a time dominated by despotic systems such as monarchies, tyrannies and aristocracies. This lapse of democratic inactivity lasted approximately two thousand years, and with time, democracy was considered a relic of the past. The resurgence of democracy began with thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, who with his concept of “*homini homino lupus*” initiated the discussion of individual liberties. Later, figures such as John Locke and Pierre Bayle advanced these ideas, criticizing monarchical absolutism and defending natural rights and religious tolerance. The French Revolution was a crucial milestone in this revival, challenging the ancient regime and establishing principles of liberty, equality and fraternity ([Escalante, 2023](#); [Nocun, 2023](#)).

In the context of the French Revolution and the American Revolution, new theories of democracy were developed in order to adapt it to the needs of the contemporary era. In France, the Revolution brought about a radical change in the liberal tradition, while in the United States, the independence of the thirteen British colonies led to the creation of a new type of democracy. Thinkers such as Benjamin Constant and James Madison played significant roles in this process. Constant argued for the importance of individual liberties in democracy and proposed a representative republic as a solution to contemporary challenges, while Madison, in the context of the U.S. Constitution, emphasized the division of powers and the protection of minorities to prevent a tyranny of the majority ([Middlekauff, 2023](#); [Freller, 2023](#))

The 19th century witnessed important changes in liberal democracy. The integration of civil and political rights into legal systems and the consequences of the Industrial Revolution led to a re-evaluation of the role of the state and on individual rights. On one hand, the need for the state to guarantee social rights such as education and health, necessary for the moral autonomy of the individual and social cohesion, was recognized. On the other hand, the rise of the working class and urbanization pressured governments to adapt their democratic institutions to guarantee social stability. David Held distinguishes two liberal models that emerged in this context: the liberal democratic, which is based on the Lockean tradition and emphasizes minimal state interference, and the democratic republican, which, influenced by John Stuart Mill, sees the state as an agent of redistributive justice and provider of public services (Moya, 2022).

The universalization of democracy has been a constant and complex process, as described by Samuel Huntington through the metaphor of “waves” of democratization. This approach describes the transition from totalitarian to democratic states and also recognizes periods of democratic regression.

The first wave of democratization occurred from 1828 to 1926. By 1926, more than 30 democracies were established (50% of the population had access to vote, male suffrage). These democracies were the United States, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Sweden, New Zealand, Ireland, Iceland, Finland, Canada, Australia, Chile, West Germany, Austria, Belgium, Colombia, Denmark, France, Italy, Japan, Holland, Norway, Uruguay, Argentina, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Hungary, East Germany, Spain, Poland, Portugal, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia (Huntington, 1994).

First counter wave occurred from 1922 to 1942. It began in 1922 with the rise of fascism, and the deepening of political polarization (fascism, Nazism, communism), and by 1942, the democracies in the world had been reduced to 12.

The Second wave of democratization occurred from 1943 to 1962. From the beginning of World War II, the occupation by the Allies gave rise to democratic institutions in West Germany, Italy, Austria, Japan and Korea. In Latin America, Uruguay returned to democracy and in the elections between 1945 and 1946 in Colombia, Argentina, Venezuela and Peru, governments elected by the people were installed. However, at the beginning of the 1950s, dictatorships were installed in the four countries mentioned above, resulting in a period of great instability for South America (Huntington, 1994). The number of democracies that reached the second wave was 36.

Second counter wave occurred from 1958 to 1975. Once again, the world turned to authoritarianism. In Peru, the armed forces intervened to change election results in 1962. In Brazil and Bolivia, democratic governments were overthrown in 1964, followed by Argentina in 1966 and Ecuador in 1972. Other coups d'état was carried out against the democracies of Uruguay and Chile in 1973. Overall, by 1962, there were 13 authoritarian governments in the world and by 1975, the number of countries with totalitarian governments rose to 38, leaving only 30 democratic countries in the world (Huntington, 1994).

Third wave of democratization began in 1974 and continues in present day. Fifteen years after the end of totalitarianism in Portugal, around 30 states in Latin America, Asia and Europe changed their authoritarian regimes for democracies. In 1994, seventy-one countries in the world became democratic.

Authoritarian governments suffered from problems of legitimacy and incompetence in dealing with economic and military problems. States with weak economies were forced to increase the standard of living of their citizens, as well as urbanization and education, which led to the growth of civic expectations. Religious organizations were predisposed to defend democratic policies. Subjects of international law such as the UN, the EU and NGOs encouraged the promotion of human rights and democracy. The influence that the democratization of some states has had on others was largely due to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).

In the closing decades of the 20th century, the advent and proliferation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) played a critical role in fostering democratic movements and enhancing global communication. The Internet, emerging as a foundational technology, revolutionized access to information, democratizing knowledge beyond the control of state-run media and traditional gatekeepers. This digital expanse served as a fertile ground for the exchange of ideas, enabling activists and citizens to connect across geographical and political divides.

Simultaneously, the introduction of email and Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) provided powerful tools for coordination and mobilization. These platforms allowed for the rapid dissemination of information and facilitated a new form of civic engagement, enabling grassroots movements to flourish. The ability to communicate instantly and organize collectively, without the need for physical presence, marked a significant shift in how civic movements could operate.

Moreover, the widespread adoption of mobile phones expanded the reach of these digital tools, bringing them into the hands of individuals in even the most remote areas. This ubiquity of mobile communication further empowered citizens, enabling real-time reporting and mobilization that was previously unimaginable.

Lastly, the nascent stages of social media and online forums towards the end of the century began to sketch the outlines of a new public square. Though not as sophisticated as platforms that would follow in the 21st century, these early digital gathering spaces provided a preview of how the internet could facilitate not only the spread of democratic ideals but also the organization of collective action across borders.

These ICTs collectively contributed to a paradigm shift in the global landscape of information exchange and civic participation. They laid the groundwork for the digital age's role in democratization, illustrating the profound impact technology can have on governance, societal engagement, and the promotion of democratic values.

Trends since 1975 indicate that most aspects of democracy have improved and that most democracies have been resilient over time. Moreover, current democratic setbacks are usually brief and give way to recovery once internal pro-democracy forces cooperate and resist against authoritarian-leaning leaders.

If a simple, exclusively electoral and clear-cut concept of democracy is applied to classify countries as either democratic or non-democratic, the number and percentage of countries considered to be electoral democracies has grown between 1975 and 2021. In 1975, governmental power was determined by competitive elections in only 46 countries, a figure that increased to 108 in 2021. One third of these countries are still under autocratic regimes, including major regional powers with large populations such as China, Egypt, the Russian Federation and Saudi Arabia. In addition, 24 democracies have been overthrown since 2005 in countries such as Mali, Niger and Thailand.

According to the Democracy Index, in 2021, only 21 countries can be categorized as full democracies. In contrast, 87 countries are grouped into categories of flawed democracies or hybrid regimes. The number of countries with authoritarian regimes more than doubles the number of full democracies.

This shows that some new democracies are not resilient. However, most of the electoral democracies created since 1975 still exist, and almost no long-standing electoral democracy has been overthrown.

While some countries have recently instituted electoral democracies for the first time in their history, most of the recent transitions to democracy have taken place in countries with previous democratic experiences. From these patterns it is important to keep in mind that democratization has always entailed a combination of gains and losses (IDEA, 2017, p. 14-15).

2.2. Major contemporary problems of democracy that can be corrected normatively.

Today's democracies suffer serious deformations. The cause of these deformations can be found in negative or malicious influences that affect collective representative decision-making, which occurs under the veil of legitimacy held by the authority that has been elected to govern by means of direct or indirect mechanisms of citizen participation. Both plutocracy and olocracy reflect two modalities of distorted democracy in the contemporary world.

Plutocracy should be understood as “the power, influence or preponderance of the rich in government the influence of money and financial sectors on public power” (Borja, 2012, pp. 1). It can be observed that through plutocracy, malicious influences are developed in the decision making carried out by democratically elected rulers in favor of those who hold the sources of wealth. For example, through inadequate financing of campaigns and political parties, as has happened in the case of bribery by the Brazilian multinational company Odebrecht:

An investigation by the United States Department of Justice published on December 21, 2016 on the Brazilian construction company Odebrecht, which details that the same would have made bribes of money and bribes, to public officials of the government of 12 countries: Angola, Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador, United States, Guatemala, Mexico, Mozambique, Panama, Peru, Dominican Republic and Venezuela, during the last 20 years, to obtain benefits in public contracts (Matute, 2016, pp.1).

As for olocracy, according to Rodrigo Borja, the term “comes from the Greek *ochlokratía*, from *ochlos* meaning “mob” or “multitude” and from *kratos* meaning

power, government or domination. It is the power or government of the plebs, that is, of the most impoverished and marginalized social class” (Borja, 2012). The word has connotations of disorder, incompetence, insipience, irresponsibility and degradation of the exercise of political command.

In practice, through powerful demagogic action and/or popular ignorance, those who come to power benefit. Through their decision-making, these people instrumentalize certain social sectors and perpetuate themselves in power, which leads to the detriment of the other political sectors in democratic society and of the general interest.

The previously mentioned deformation of democracy is better known as populism. Political scientists and jurists have begun to reflect on the resurgence of the phenomenon, without losing sight of the disastrous precedents left for the world by the populisms of Hitler, Mussolini, Franco, Stalin and Salazar in Europe.

Roger Bartra has stated the following about the resurgence of populism:

Populism is a subject in whose study the social sciences have been extraordinarily creative and fruitful in Latin America. Thanks to the research and reflection that began more than forty years ago, we now have a rich body of ideas on populism that allows us to approach the resurgence of this complex political phenomenon with a certain degree of ease. It is true that, to the extent that populism seemed buried or marginalized, interest in its study declined. Aprismo, Cardenismo, Peronism and Varguismo seemed to have become extinct. The echoes of the populism of Paz Estenssoro in Bolivia, of Velasco Ibarra in Ecuador and of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in Colombia ceased to be heard. But in recent years the steps of populism have been resounding again. Since 1988 in Mexico there has been a return of Cardenism, in 1998 Hugo Chavez becomes president in Venezuela and in 2006 two successful electoral campaigns lead Rafael Correa and Evo Morales to the presidency in Ecuador and Bolivia. In Peru that same year, an aggressive populist, Ollanta Humala, ran against Alan Garcia, an aprista... Years before, we had witnessed the resurgence of populist styles in Menemism and Fujimorism. Today no one doubts that populism is back (Bartra, 2008, p.2).

In addition, the Western world is still not overtaken by the Anglo-Saxon populist phenomena represented by the Brexit and the American presidential elections that gave victory to Donald Trump. Consequently, we partially agree with Pierre Ostiguy regarding his characterization of populism as:

...a style of governing rather than a political ideology. For this reason, it is difficult to identify a link between a particular political position and populism. However, it is possible to establish a number of factors that characterize most populist governments. In general, populism stems from a charismatic leader who is perceived as part of the people, and who, as part of the people, understands their problems and difficulties. Usually, populist leaders exploit the feeling of oppression of the masses and social injustices to mobilize as many people as they can, often against the interests of the social or political elites. Populist leaders stay

in power precisely because of their popularity, and because of this, it is necessary for them to implement policies that favor the people, which often means setting aside the laws and norms of the constitution. This is often reflected in the nationalization of foreign companies, or the decision not to pay the foreign debt. Usually, corporations and economic elites tend to be the most affected by populist policies, since the leader turns to them to create social antagonisms that favor his position. Thus, the leader is perceived as the defender of the people against the voracious interests of corporations and the upper classes (Ostiguy, 2001, p. 22).

After the American experience, disagreements could be established regarding the characteristics of the populist leader exposed by Ostiguy. This is precisely because corporations and economic elites have benefited from Trump's nationalist and protectionist policies synthesized in the slogan "America First," which deprecates not only the complexity of the populist phenomenon and its derivations, but the accentuation in its main characteristic: a style of governing rather than a political ideology that is based on strategies that concurrently seek to instrumentalize the support of the popular classes, which occurs within the left-right spectra indistinctly (Ramos, 2017).

In a similar vein, Ralf Dahrendorf has expressed himself as follows: "populists on the right, populists on the left. Whoever says "populism" is entering a difficult terrain... In any case, the concept of populism is pejorative... We are talking about demagoguery, and demagoguery has a large repertoire of methods" (Dahrendorf, 2006, p. 304).

Consequently, aretecracy would be called upon to reduce the possibility of expansion of populist phenomena, as well as plutocracy, through the achievement of minimum guarantees that would lead to the protection of the electorate, as well as of the precious legal goods contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

2.3. Contemporary theories of democracy

Since the 1980s, different theories of democracy have begun to be distinguished on the basis of two different perspectives in principle; however, as a result of the multiple approaches made by theorists, the boundaries between the two perspectives have become blurred.

The two perspectives referred to above are descriptive and prescriptive. Descriptive theories, also called positive theories, generally explain "being," that is, things as they really are. The order present in nature or in what is purely human is formulated by means of propositions that form stable relationships between different entities or processes. "These relations may be quantitative or qualitative, equalities or inequalities, exact or tendency. The simplest, fundamental or deep regularities generate in an emergent way more complex regularities at various levels" (Capella, 2012). Positive theories of democracy try to explain democracy and especially politics as they are and not as they should be.

Thus, within the positive approaches, the economic theories of democracy of Kenneth Arrow and Duncan Black can be distinguished, whose object of study is centered

on the formulation of a series of criteria that must meet conditions of rationality and basic justice, and that serve for collective decision-making (Serrano, 1999). On the other hand, the economic theory of democracy by Anthony Downs focuses on the development of a model that can explain the behavior of voters, political parties, politicians and rulers. According to Downs, politicians and parties behave like entrepreneurs and companies that exchange votes for policies instead of money for goods and services (Strom, 2013).

Within the positive theories of democracy, we can look to the theories of James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock, referring to the calculation of consensus and the exchange of votes. Additionally, we can look to the pluralist theories of Truman, Dahl or Lipset, which generally reflect an idea of democracy as a result of the struggle between power groups representing social interests, so that voters give support to political parties and institutions that have different agendas, interests and objectives, which makes it possible to articulate the popular will through institutional intertwining and thus achieve a political manifestation (Osto, 2010).

Conversely, prescriptive theories, also known as normative theories, try to explain things as they should be, starting from a description of reality, but adding a deontic operator: obligations to do or not to do. Normative approaches do not seek in the first instance to describe the behavior of individuals or institutions or organizations, but rather to influence, condition and order them. The most representative normative theories of democracy include the deliberative democracy of Jürgen Habermas and the consensual democracy of John Rawls.

Deliberative democracy implies the use of a prescriptive model that attempts to perfect representative democracy through the establishment of a collective procedure of political decision-making that includes the active participation of all those potentially affected by such decisions, and that would be based on the principle of deliberation, which implies public argumentation and discussion of the various proposals. Habermas proposes linking deliberation to the process of opinion formation and therefore political will within the context of the legislative function. He considers the particularities of democratic states and equates collective decision-making in which all those who have the potential to be affected by the decision or by their representatives participate with deliberative democracy through an impartial and rational procedure (Velasco, 2009).

The consensual democracy of John Rawls proposes the search for a methodology that manages to materialize principles of justice that allow regulating and ordering the different models of democracy capable of creating strong and virtuous political institutions that can favor the “consensus of consensuses” through which it is possible to govern effectively (Osorio, 2010, p.149). Rawls starts from an original position with a metaphor that he calls the veil of ignorance through which the primary goods and the conditions of deliberation that allow achieving the principles of justice are designated. Rawls concludes, among other things, that the principles of justice should lead the States to intervene in the economic sphere to reduce inequality, and also that the multiculturalism implied by the national component of a given state should be deepened.

The criteria for aretecracy will be substantiated, defined and characterized below. In principle, it could be argued that aretecracy is circumscribed within the contexts of normative or prescriptive theories as long as it is conceived to procure the “ought to be” of democracy, avoiding distorted modalities such as plutocracy and olocracy (populism). Nevertheless, it is necessary to emphasize that aretecracy is based on the reality reflected by the problems of democracy, whose most infamous deformations are found in the instrumentalizations and negative or malicious influences that affect the decision making of the authorities that have been elected to govern or legislate through direct or indirect mechanisms of citizen participation. Aretecracy aims to provide tools to promote the “must be” of democracy through a prior qualification procedure to which every individual who seeks to achieve executive power in the first instance and legislative power in the second instance must submit.

3. Arete democracy or virtuedmocracy, or in its simplified form aretecracy or virtuecracy as a response to the contemporary problems of democracy.

The word *areté*, in Greek: ἀρετή *areté* “excellence” in its most basic sense means “excellence of any kind or type” (Liddell, 1940). The term also means moral virtue, according to Richard Hooker the concept of the word *areté* synthesizes the most articulated value in Greek culture and translated as “virtue”, the notion *areté* takes for meaning something akin to “being the best one can be” or “achieving the greatest human potential” (Hooker, 1999) .

Probably the most connoted critic of Greek democracy was Plato and according to this philosopher, only the “best citizens” should rule. Originally, the “best citizens” should excel for their “knowledge and their constant search for truth,” and this political system was called aristocracy. Etymologically the word aristocracy means “government of the best”, from the Greek ἀριστοκρατία *aristokratía*, from ἄριστος *aristos*: good or better, and κράτος, *kratos*: power.

Plato states that in an aristocratic system of government the philosophers would be called to rule, however, the meaning of the concept of aristocracy mutated drastically during the monarchies of the modern era to identify individuals whose political and economic power was to be transmitted by hereditary right.

For Plato, there are four specific forms of virtue inherent to the *polis*: courage, temperance, prudence and justice. Courage would correspond to warriors, temperance to artisans, prudence to rulers, but justice would touch everyone, hence, acting justly is the fundamental virtue. Plato also associated each specific form of virtue with a part of the soul: bravery with anger or wrath, temperance with dignity and prudence with reason, however, for Plato moral perfection could only be achieved if each specific virtue was linked to the fundamental virtue: justice (Enríquez, 2012). For example, the ruler perfected his individual virtue if in addition to exercising prudence, he exercised the fundamental virtue: justice.

Aristotle, for his part, defined virtue as the proportionate action of the citizen in his emotions and according to him: “virtue is the habit by which man makes himself good and performs well the work entrusted to him” (Aristóteles, 2004).

Aristotle explains that the disproportionate action of the citizen in his emotions and his own conduct constitutes the opposite of virtue: vice. For example, the ruler who acts foolishly contradicts the specific virtue of prudence and in this case, foolishness is a vice.

As to be observed below, aretecracy differs ostensibly from the concept of aristocracy conceived from Christianity and based on the divine right to govern. Likewise, it differs from the concept proposed by Plato regarding the government of the “best,” specified in the government of the philosophers, to be based on a government that, although it does not set aside the essential principles of democracy, opposes its deformations.

Aretecracy, in sum, demands a qualified democracy in association with the civic and secular virtue that must be possessed and exercised by those who hold the power to make collective decisions. The implementation of aretecracy would potentialize the birth of a new democratic culture, understood as a set of values and principles that in a socio-historical context is determined by its practices and socializations in the performance of citizenship, in search of the common good (Hernández, Meléndez & Chumaceiro, 2017).

Arete democracy or virtuedemocracy (Greek: ἀρετή *areté* “excellence” “virtue” and from the Late Latin *democratia*, and this from the Greek δημοκρατία *dēmokratía*) would constitute a form of government organization that attributes the qualified, suitable and qualified ownership of power to the citizenry as a whole. The philosopher Ferrater Mora explains that virtue from its purest essence is:

“In its most generally accepted meaning, virtue continues to be defined as the disposition or habit of acting in accordance with the moral intention, a disposition that is not maintained without a struggle against the obstacles that oppose such action, and therefore virtue is also conceived, uniting both senses, as the spirit and courage to act well or, as Kant said, as moral fortitude in the fulfillment of duty” (Ferrater, 1965).

It is necessary to clarify that “moral virtue” should be understood as the habit, spirit and courage to act well, by the mere goodness of the operation, in accordance with the universal morality that is inscribed in the principles that emanate from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

In theoretical terms, arete democracy or virtuedemocracy would constitute a form of social organization of government, in which collective decisions are adopted by the people through the concurrence of two consequent scenarios. The first scenario is aimed at achieving a prior and necessary qualification by the pretenders to represent the people. The second scenario, on the other hand, includes the mechanisms of direct or indirect citizen participation. Overall, only the concurrence of both scenarios could

confer legitimacy to the representatives of the people to exercise their government with minimum guarantees for the exercise of power.

The realities faced by citizens in the various areas of their social development include both the search for better living conditions and the commitment to solidarity with others, in a mutual interrelation that is beneficial to all (Hernández, Chumaceiro & Atencio, 2009). Therefore, the authority elected to govern has the moral obligation to honor its commitment to its constituents and aretecracy would serve as a guarantee for this.

Strictly speaking, aretecracy is a qualified and therefore legitimate form of government in which there is popular participation through suffrage in free elections, so that the inhabitants of a state would periodically elect their representatives, previously qualified to govern through a process of popular election by voting.

Regarding the qualification process mentioned above, it is considered that the best scenario that can guarantee the qualification of those aspiring to govern from the executive branch of public power requires the constitution of an autonomous body in a national state. This body should promote the objective and qualitative qualification in abilities, skills and ethical qualities of the candidates who intend to exercise the popular representation from the executive branch of public power by means of the assignment of scores.

The proposed body should also exercise a disciplinary function by means of which it may initiate *ex officio*, advance and rule on the investigations that may be carried out against the elected public servants for breaches to the aretecracy. In the cases of being found guilty, those servants should lose their investiture.

The members of the aforementioned body should be elected by the High Courts with jurisdictional functions in constitutional matters that exist in the national state, after exhausting a public merit-based competition evaluated by accredited institutions of higher education or other institutions that can fulfill a similar function. This would provide an institutional balance typical of the system of checks and balances and would avoid the politicization of the qualifying body.

It is necessary to establish minimum evaluation criteria for the prior qualification of those citizens who intend to exercise popular representation in the executive branch of public power:

a) **Judicial, administrative and disciplinary résumé:** in the first criterion, it should be understood that any judicial, administrative or disciplinary convictions by national jurisdictional and disciplinary bodies as well as by foreign and international jurisdictional or disciplinary bodies will be negatively qualified.

b) **Demonstrable social work:** in the second criterion, it should be understood that the execution of social works whose positive impact on society is quantifiable, and will be positively qualified.

c) **Public and private actions *areté*:** the applicant's private and public actions will be qualified; these actions must be in accordance with the ethical and moral principles that emanate from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

d) **The degree of education:** the fourth criterion should be understood as qualifying the academic preparation and experience of the candidate to be representative of the people, as well as the validity of academic degrees and proven work and social experience.

e) **Ethical reputation:** the candidate's public and private life will be qualified, extended to his ethical reputation, for which the occurrence of scandals that compromise ethics and morals will be taken into account, as well as his speeches and the support given and received by the candidate from xenophobic, sexist, racist, homophobic, fundamentalist or discriminatory sectors of any kind.

Each of the above criteria would allow the candidate to obtain a score, which after the establishment of minimum and maximum scores, would make his profile viable as a candidate to represent a people from the executive branch of public power. Consequently, if the candidate to represent a territorial entity fails to exceed the pre-established minimum score, he will not be able to run in public elections and subject to direct or indirect suffrage. The minimum score shall be determined by the legal framework that regulates the aretecracy, without prejudice of additional criteria for the qualification that are considered through the exercise of citizen participation. Criteria considered through the exercise of citizen participation, could allow a higher score to be available, but never lower than the one indicated in the legal framework that regulates the aretecracy.

Aretecracy would be called to be applied to those who intend to exercise the government of the territorial entities of a state, which implies that all governors of territorial entities should be subject to the process of prior qualification and certifying the suitability to exercise governance. In any case, the implementation of the qualification process exercised by the proposed body should be deepened and conditioned in a gradual manner, prioritizing the implementation for the heads of the executive branch of public power. However, negative or malicious influences in decision making are also observed in officials of other branches of public power, so that aretecracy will also be called to be applied to elected public officials of the legislative branch of public power. In other words, aretecracy should be applied to all government processes that are subject to direct and indirect suffrage.

3.1. General Characteristics and Formal Procedures for the Pre-Qualification Process in Aretecracy

Aretecracy, as a model of qualified governance based on ethical excellence and competence, demands a theoretical and practical framework that sustains its viability and legitimacy. Within this model, the selection process for those entrusted with collective decision-making is a fundamental pillar to ensure that only the most qualified and ethically prepared individuals assume these responsibilities. Therefore, defining the General Characteristics and the Formal Procedures for the Pre-Qualification Process is not merely a theoretical exercise, but an indispensable component that ensures the guiding principle of Aretecracy—the pursuit of virtue and excellence in leadership—endures over time and across political contexts.

The structuring of this process responds not only to a technical need but to a normative aspiration: the creation of a system where decisions impacting the collective are not left to chance or power manipulation, but are the result of a rigorous evaluation of the candidates' capabilities and ethics. This development, in its entirety, represents a theoretical contribution by the author, aimed at addressing contemporary democratic deformations such as plutocracy and ochlocracy, offering a well-founded alternative.

The General Characteristics of Aretocracy are the fundamental principles that define the spirit of this governance model and provide a framework for its implementation. Unlike other systems that prioritize popular representation without a qualitative filter, Aretocracy distinguishes itself by requiring an ethical and technical pre-qualification for any candidate aspiring to hold public office.

These characteristics focus on ensuring that those aspiring to lead are not only highly trained and professionally qualified but also possess an irreproachable moral character. The objectives of these characteristics are manifold: to prevent systemic corruption arising from arbitrary or manipulated selection processes, to promote leadership founded on justice and equity, and to ensure that the exercise of power is always aligned with the collective well-being and human rights. In this sense, Aretocracy does not merely evaluate the technical abilities of candidates but delves deeper into their moral integrity and demonstrated commitment to the common good.

Thus, ethical excellence becomes the central axis of governance, ensuring that the exercise of power is not only effective but also just and deeply humane. This principle further allows the system to protect itself from the inherent vices of contemporary politics, such as clientelism, populism, and demagogic manipulation.

The Formal Procedures for the Pre-Qualification Process are the concrete mechanism through which the general characteristics of Aretocracy are operationalized. These consist of a set of established steps designed to objectively evaluate the suitability of candidates for public office. These procedures are not mere formalities but essential elements that ensure the selection of leaders is free from favoritism or political interference.

Pre-qualification includes criteria ranging from a thorough review of the candidate's professional trajectory to an evaluation of their ethical conduct, both in public and private spheres. This process, in addition to being rigorous, must be transparent, with clearly defined rules that prevent individuals who do not meet the highest standards of virtue and competence from accessing power.

The purpose of these procedures is twofold: on the one hand, to filter out candidates who do not meet the ethical and technical criteria necessary for governance; and on the other hand, to provide the electorate with a guarantee that the candidates standing for election have undergone an evaluation process that certifies their suitability. In this way, the pre-qualification process not only contributes to greater public trust in the selected leaders but also strengthens the integrity of the democratic system by ensuring that those who occupy positions of power do so in a fair and competent manner.

The General Characteristics and the Formal Procedures of Aretocracy, as devel-

oped below, complement each other organically. While the former establishes the fundamental values and objectives of the system, the latter ensures its practical implementation through a clear, transparent, and rigorous process. Together, they provide a framework that not only prevents the common distortions of democracy but also promotes a form of governance that is more just, effective, and virtuous. By carefully structuring both components, the foundations are laid for an Aretocracy that, far from being a theoretical utopia, can become a political reality capable of addressing the contemporary challenges of ethical governance.

3.2. General characteristics of aretecracy

Qualified Representativeness: It rests on the concept of representativeness. The free and secret vote is the mechanism that ensures the representation of all citizens in the hands of a relatively small group of individuals previously qualified to make decisions in a democratic environment.

Human and Political Rights: Ensures through minimum guarantees through prior qualification for the defense and protection of human and political rights. An arete-democratic or virtue-democratic system provides the opportunity for organization and full participation in the political, economic and cultural life of a country, and guarantees freedom of expression and worship.

Guarantees to rights: Aretedemocracy or virtueemocracy is based on the principles of majority rule and individual rights. In every arete-democratic or virtueemocratic society, there are guarantees to individual rights, especially contemplating the rights of minorities and dissidents.

Political participation and pluralism: Aretedemocracy or virtue democracy is based on political participation and pluralism. Understanding politics as the mechanism to achieve objectives of progress in a society, in which there are always groups with different, sometimes even opposing interests, civilized citizen participation is fundamental to any democratic process, with political parties and leaders previously qualified to listen to and respect the will of citizens ([Arrieta-López, 2019](#); [Ramírez, 2022](#); [Arrieta-López, 2023](#)).

3.3. Solemn forms for the pre-qualification process.

The pre-qualification of public servants by the qualifying body should be a rigorous and transparent process. In the following, I will describe forms that could be considered in this pre-qualification:

3.3.1. Establishment of evaluation criteria

The pre-qualification process for public officials must be rigorous, ensuring that those who ascend to positions of authority possess a strong commitment to human rights and ethical governance. Evaluation criteria should encompass respect for civil, political, economic, and social rights, with a focus on promoting equality, non-discrimination, and access to essential services such as education and healthcare. Candidates should

demonstrate a clear dedication to safeguarding fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of expression and association, and ensure the equitable treatment of all citizens.

In addition to ethical standards, candidates must exhibit professional competence and expertise in their respective fields. This includes relevant experience, up-to-date knowledge of public policy, and the ability to lead effectively. Ethical leadership also demands transparency and accountability, ensuring decisions are made with integrity and in the public interest. Thus, technical proficiency and moral integrity must be harmonized to guarantee effective and fair governance.

Ultimately, the pre-qualification process aims to select individuals who are not only technically skilled but also ethically committed to the common good. By integrating both professional aptitude and adherence to human rights principles, this process strengthens institutional trust and promotes governance that is equitable, transparent, and responsive to societal needs.

3.3.2. Call for Applications and Nomination Process

A key element in ensuring the integrity and transparency of the pre-qualification process is the establishment of an open and equitable call for applications. This process should be widely publicized to guarantee broad participation from all sectors of society, ensuring that any qualified individual, regardless of background, has the opportunity to submit their candidacy. Accessibility and non-discrimination are fundamental, with mechanisms in place to eliminate barriers that may hinder the participation of underrepresented groups, thus promoting a truly inclusive and diverse candidate pool.

The application process itself must be standardized and clearly defined to avoid ambiguities or biases. Candidates should be required to submit specific, objective information directly related to the competencies needed for the position. This consistency in documentation ensures that all candidates are evaluated on a level playing field, facilitating the comparison of qualifications and maintaining fairness. Furthermore, sufficient timeframes should be allotted to allow candidates to prepare and gather necessary documentation, avoiding rushed or incomplete submissions that might compromise the process.

The evaluation of candidates must be conducted by impartial committees composed of experts and representatives from civil society, free from conflicts of interest. These committees are tasked with ensuring that the evaluation adheres strictly to the predetermined criteria, without preference or favoritism. The transparency of this process is crucial; thus, the results should be communicated promptly and clearly, along with detailed explanations of the decision-making process, ensuring that all candidates understand the reasons behind their selection or rejection.

A fair and accessible appeal mechanism should be established to allow candidates to contest evaluations they believe were conducted unjustly. This step not only provides an avenue for correcting potential errors or biases but also reinforces the legitimacy and accountability of the entire process. By ensuring these principles are upheld, the call for applications fosters a democratic and transparent system, selecting the most qualified and ethical individuals for public office, thus strengthening the foundations

of a virtuous governance system.

3.3.3. Evaluation of background and experience

The evaluation of a candidate's background and experience is pivotal to determining their suitability for public office within the Aretecracy framework. This assessment must go beyond academic credentials, focusing on the candidate's demonstrated commitment to human rights, justice, and ethical governance. It is essential to evaluate their understanding of first, second, and third-generation human rights—encompassing civil liberties, social equity, and collective responsibilities—ensuring that their role in public office aligns with the ethical principles underpinning Aretecracy. A candidate must not only show technical competence but also possess a moral compass rooted in the common good, reinforcing governance that prioritizes ethical leadership.

A candidate's track record should reflect meaningful engagement with human rights, both in theory and in practice. This includes experience in policy-making, human rights advocacy, or leadership roles that contribute to the protection and promotion of rights. Their involvement in advancing gender equality, economic justice, and safeguarding vulnerable populations must be rigorously evaluated to measure their ability to translate ethical principles into impactful public action. Within Aretecracy, effective leadership is defined not only by technical skills but by a deep commitment to social justice and human dignity, which are core to building a more equitable society.

Leadership is another critical factor in this evaluation, particularly the candidate's capacity to make decisions that uphold ethical governance. Candidates must demonstrate transparency, accountability, and an inclusive approach to decision-making, empowering marginalized communities and fostering open, participatory dialogue. Their leadership must aim to create just outcomes while maintaining public trust through principled governance. Aretecracy seeks leaders who not only manage public institutions but also guide them toward equitable solutions that reflect the needs and rights of all citizens.

Lastly, adaptability and resilience are essential traits in an Aretecratic leader. Candidates must be able to navigate dynamic political environments while maintaining ethical integrity and transparency. Their ability to handle public scrutiny, promote citizen participation, and empower communities through accessible decision-making processes is vital. This comprehensive evaluation ensures that those selected for public office are not only technically qualified but also embody the virtues necessary for ethical and effective governance, capable of addressing contemporary societal challenges with integrity and foresight.

3.3.4. Holistic Competence Evaluation: Examinations and Tests

In Aretecracy, the assessment of candidates for public office involves a holistic evaluation of their knowledge, leadership capabilities, and ethical integrity. These examinations are designed not only to assess academic knowledge but also to gauge

how well candidates can apply theoretical concepts to practical, real-world governance challenges. The primary goal is to ensure that candidates possess the necessary technical skills, ethical grounding, and leadership qualities essential for effective and ethical public service. By integrating both theoretical and practical components, this process provides a comprehensive evaluation of candidates' readiness to serve in complex governance roles.

The technical aspect of the examination focuses on core competencies such as law, public administration, and governance. This may involve multiple-choice questions on legal frameworks, as well as practical case studies that require candidates to analyze hypothetical scenarios and propose informed solutions. These assessments ensure that candidates are equipped with the necessary expertise to navigate the intricacies of governance and make sound, evidence-based decisions. Practical application is emphasized, ensuring that theoretical knowledge translates effectively into real-life problem-solving.

Beyond technical proficiency, leadership and management skills are critical for ensuring ethical governance. Situational interviews and case analyses are employed to assess the candidate's decision-making, resource management, and conflict-resolution abilities. These assessments focus on how candidates lead teams, balance authority with ethical responsibility, and maintain transparency and accountability in public office. By evaluating leadership in action, Aretocracy ensures that only those candidates who can guide public institutions with integrity and fairness are selected.

Ethical values and alignment with human rights are equally central to the evaluation process. Through essay questions and personal interviews, candidates are assessed on their commitment to social justice, equality, and integrity. This component ensures that potential leaders possess not only strong ethical principles but also a demonstrated willingness to uphold these values in their decision-making processes. The holistic examination aims to identify candidates who embody a balance of technical competence and virtuous character, fostering governance that is both responsible and transparent.

3.3.5. Interviews and personal evaluation

In the Aretocracy framework, interviews are essential for assessing a candidate's integrity, ethical values, leadership abilities, and decision-making capacity. Conducted by a panel of impartial experts in ethics and governance, these interviews provide a platform to deeply explore the candidate's motivations, focusing on their personal commitment to ethical governance. Rather than emphasizing technical qualifications, the interviews are designed to assess how candidates apply ethical principles in challenging situations, particularly when balancing individual interests with the collective welfare.

The key focus of these interviews is on the candidate's ethical decision-making and leadership style. Evaluators probe how the candidate navigates difficult decisions transparently and accountably, ensuring they engage effectively with diverse stakeholders and manage conflicts of interest. The panel assesses the candidate's ability to

foster inclusive decision-making, particularly regarding marginalized communities, and to uphold human rights and principles of non-discrimination. This evaluation is critical for understanding how the candidate promotes participatory governance and addresses pressing issues such as gender equality and social justice.

Lastly, the interview process delves into the candidate's personal integrity, examining their commitment to transparency, resistance to corruption, and ability to navigate ethical dilemmas. Candidates are asked to provide concrete examples of how they have upheld honesty and ethical standards in previous roles. By concentrating on these vital aspects, the interviews ensure that only candidates who demonstrate both strong ethical values and leadership potential are advanced, reinforcing the principles of virtuous governance that Aretocracy champions.

3.3.6. Peer review

The peer review process within the Aretocracy framework plays a crucial role in adding an independent and rigorous layer of evaluation to the candidate selection process for public office. After the initial internal assessments by the qualification body, peer reviewers—comprising external experts such as leading practitioners, academics, and civil society leaders—are brought in to offer an additional, impartial perspective. These external evaluators contribute specialized knowledge and experience to ensure the selection process is both transparent and objective, going beyond internal reviews.

Peer reviewers are chosen based on strict criteria of competence, independence, and ethical commitment. These evaluators must possess substantial experience in governance, legal frameworks, and ethical principles, and must be free from conflicts of interest or external pressures. Their suitability is ensured through thorough assessments, including interviews and background checks, to confirm that they are capable of evaluating candidates on merit and ethical alignment. By involving peer reviewers at this stage, the Aretocracy model strengthens its commitment to fair and ethical governance.

The peer review process follows a methodical structure. Once peer reviewers are selected, they conduct individual evaluations of each candidate's background, qualifications, and ethical standing. Afterward, these external evaluators collaborate in consensus meetings to discuss their findings and reach a balanced evaluation of each candidate's strengths and weaknesses. The final product is a comprehensive report that complements the internal assessment, providing the qualification body with a well-rounded basis for making its final decision. By involving external experts at this stage, Aretocracy ensures that the selection of public officials is aligned with the highest standards of transparency, merit, and ethical governance.

3.3.7. Review and verification of results

The review and verification of evaluation results are fundamental to upholding the integrity and transparency of the pre-qualification process in Aretocracy. Ensuring that decisions are fair and consistent protects the legitimacy of the process and builds public trust in the selection of public officials. The qualification body must internally

review the procedures to confirm that the evaluation adhered to the established criteria and standards. Candidates should also have the right to appeal, with impartial mechanisms in place to resolve disputes or concerns about the fairness of their evaluations.

To further ensure objectivity, external bodies such as academic institutions or independent expert committees may participate in the review process. These external reviewers provide an additional layer of oversight, verifying that the decisions align with ethical principles and governance standards. Their role ensures that the evaluation process remains impartial and free from any undue influence, thus enhancing the credibility and transparency of the results. This external validation reinforces the fairness and objectivity that are essential to Aretocracy's emphasis on ethical governance.

A two-tiered appeals system may also be implemented to provide candidates with a fair opportunity to contest their results. In this system, an independent tribunal or appeals committee reviews the case, ensuring that any mistakes or inconsistencies are addressed transparently. This structure ensures that candidates receive a just evaluation, while the process remains consistent with the core principles of fairness, accountability, and ethical governance that underpin the Aretocracy model.

4. Barriers to Excellence: Addressing the Challenges of Aretocracy

Aretocracy, as an emerging paradigm of governance based on virtue and ethical excellence, faces multiple challenges stemming from the current structure of political power and the underlying interests in contemporary realpolitik. These obstacles, however, are not only surmountable but their resolution is crucial for consolidating a political system that remains aligned with its core principles. Below are the critical challenges that Aretocracy faces, along with proposals on how this model can address them without compromising its essence.

4.1 Resistance from Traditional Elites

One of the greatest obstacles to the implementation of Aretocracy is the resistance that would naturally arise from the economic and political elites that currently dominate many democratic systems. These elites, under plutocratic or populist regimes, exert considerable control over political decisions through their influence on campaigns, media, and clientelist networks. Aretocracy, by requiring a pre-qualification process that evaluates the virtue and ethical fitness of candidates, directly threatens the power these elites have consolidated under systems that demand far less in terms of ethics and capacity.

Aretocracy can address this resistance in two fundamental ways. First, its implementation must be gradual and accompanied by strong citizen support through civic education. This educational process must not only encompass the theoretical understanding of the Aretocratic model but also focus on how it serves as a true instrument for social justice, in contrast to systems that allow economic interests to prevail over the common good. The idea of virtuous leadership, based on ethics and competence, should be communicated as a robust alternative to oligarchic control and populist manipulations. This educational effort can strengthen public support

and weaken elite resistance, making it difficult for them to openly oppose a system that promotes the common good transparently.

Secondly, the creation of an independent pre-qualification body with institutional autonomy and insulated from elite influence could ensure that the evaluation process remains uncompromised. This body, composed of impartial experts in ethics, human rights, and politics, would serve as a guarantor of the process's objectivity. Moreover, the entity would need to publicly and regularly report its decisions, exposing any attempts by traditional elites to undermine the process. Transparency in decision-making would disarm any sabotage attempts by elites, exposing their manipulations to public scrutiny and safeguarding the ethical core of Aretocracy.

4.2 Difficulty in Defining and Measuring Ethical and Moral Excellence

Aretocracy faces the complex task of defining and measuring universal standards of virtue and moral excellence. While ethical principles are largely universal, their interpretation and application may vary across cultural and political contexts. This raises the difficulty of establishing clear criteria that can be evaluated fairly without falling into subjectivity that could undermine the pre-qualification process.

To overcome this challenge, Aretocracy must adopt a multidimensional approach based on internationally agreed-upon standards. Human rights and fundamental ethical principles, derived from instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, provide a solid and universal foundation on which to build standards of virtue applicable globally. These instruments offer a normative framework that, while adaptable locally, establishes a universal ethical minimum that should guide candidate evaluations.

Additionally, emerging frameworks such as the Declaration on the Human Right to a Healthy Environment must be included, extending the ethical responsibility of leaders toward sustainability and global well-being. This reinforces the notion that ethical excellence is not limited to individual rights but also encompasses the protection of the environment and the rights of future generations.

The ethical evaluation process must be rigorous yet flexible, allowing for cultural adaptations without compromising the fundamental principles of integrity, justice, and equity. This can be achieved through a weighted scoring system, where both the candidates' technical competencies and their ethical track records are evaluated. Independent peer reviews, involving ethics and human rights experts, along with the participation of specialized international organizations, can ensure that the process remains impartial, reducing subjectivity and guaranteeing the objectivity of decisions.

4.3 Populism and Media Manipulation

Populism represents another significant obstacle to Aretocracy, as this style of governance appeals to the emotions and immediate desires of the masses, using media manipulation as a primary tool. Populist leaders could delegitimize the pre-qualifi-

cation process, portraying it as elitist or anti-democratic, diverting the electorate's attention towards empty but attractive promises.

Populism can be countered through a strategy of total transparency and robust political education. Aretocracy must make it explicit that the pre-qualification process is not an elitist tool but a mechanism designed to protect the people's interests, ensuring that only the most qualified and ethically prepared individuals come to power. The transparency of the process is fundamental: every step of the pre-qualification process and the criteria used must be made public, allowing citizens to understand the value of the process and adopt it as a democratic control mechanism against populist abuses.

Moreover, it is crucial that Aretocracy uses the same media tools as populists, but with a focus on civic education. The use of mass campaigns across traditional and digital media, aimed at explaining the benefits of ethical and virtuous leadership, can create an effective counterbalance to media manipulation. These campaigns must go beyond mere information dissemination; they must engage citizens through interactive forums, public debates, and participation in digital platforms that foster an open dialogue about the ethical values underpinning Aretocracy.

4.4 Lack of Infrastructure and Political Will to Implement the System

Aretocracy requires a robust institutional framework that enables the ethical and rigorous pre-qualification process. However, many countries lack the institutional infrastructure and political will necessary to implement such a demanding system. Systemic corruption, administrative shortcomings, and the lack of independence of oversight bodies are considerable obstacles.

To address this challenge, Aretocracy must promote the creation of a transnational pre-qualification body, supported by international organizations such as the United Nations or the OECD. This body would not only provide technical assistance and oversight at the local level but also serve as a model for national institutions, ensuring that the pre-qualification process remains independent and free from local power dynamics. This transnational body would act as a global ethical certifier, imposing minimum standards that countries could adopt and adapt to their specific contexts.

Furthermore, international alliances can play a key role in the local implementation of Aretocracy, providing financial and technical resources to strengthen institutional capacities. These alliances could include not only government actors but also NGOs, academics, and civil society. The involvement of external actors would not only ensure the independence of the process but also create an international scrutiny system that would increase pressure on national governments to improve their governance structures.

4.5 Education and Political Culture

The success of Aretocracy also depends on an educated electorate that is aware of the importance of virtue and ethics in politics. Without a solid foundation of civic education, voters may continue to prioritize charismatic leaders or those offering immediate solutions to complex problems, ignoring the need for ethical pre-qualification.

Aretocracy must be integrated with a comprehensive civic education program, implemented both in schools and through public campaigns. This program must not only teach democratic principles but also instill the values of ethics, justice, and the common good. Through this education, the electorate will not only be better informed but also empowered to value the importance of virtuous leadership and to reject candidates who do not meet minimum ethical standards.

Additionally, advanced technological platforms could be used to engage citizens in the pre-qualification process, providing real-time information on candidates and their ethical backgrounds. Artificial intelligence could play a crucial role in this regard, allowing for objective analysis that is accessible to voters. This approach would increase citizen participation and the legitimacy of the Aretocratic process, fostering a political culture oriented toward excellence and ethical commitment.

4.6 Challenges of Democratic Legitimacy

One of the most complex challenges Aretocracy faces is balancing candidate pre-qualification with the perception of democratic legitimacy. There is a risk that the pre-qualification process could be seen as limiting popular sovereignty, creating tensions with the traditional principles of representative democracy.

To address this challenge, Aretocracy must maintain a participatory approach in its implementation. The pre-qualification process should not be perceived as a restriction on popular will, but rather as a protective mechanism for it. Citizens could be involved in certain stages of the evaluation process, allowing them to voice opinions on the candidates and ensuring that the evaluations are transparent and participatory.

Moreover, Aretocracy must be complementary to traditional democratic mechanisms, ensuring that citizens retain their right to choose within a framework where candidates have been pre-certified as ethically fit. Pre-qualification should not be presented as a limitation, but as an additional step that strengthens democracy by ensuring that the leaders who reach the ballot box are the most prepared and ethically capable. In this way, Aretocracy can consolidate its legitimacy without compromising democratic principles.

The challenges Aretocracy faces are not insurmountable; in fact, they represent opportunities to further strengthen its proposal. By implementing solutions based on transparency, education, and citizen participation, Aretocracy can successfully confront the structural, political, and cultural barriers. This model of governance not only offers a viable solution to the current deficiencies of democracy but, in its capacity to adapt and overcome these obstacles, demonstrates its potential to be the ethical and effective governance model of the future.

CONCLUSIONS

A Democratic Reinvention through Aretocracy: Aretocracy is more than just a reform; it is a fundamental reimagining of democracy itself. By embedding ethics and virtue as core elements in the selection and evaluation of leaders, it offers a solution to the growing challenges facing modern democratic systems, such as populism and plutocracy. The reinsertion of moral values at the center of governance has the potential to revitalize and strengthen democratic institutions globally. Far from undermining democratic choice, the process of pre-qualification enhances it by ensuring that only those who meet the highest ethical standards are eligible to serve. This mechanism protects the essence of democracy, reinforcing it through the ethical vetting of leaders who are both competent and committed to the common good.

Overcoming Structural and Cultural Challenges: Aretocracy must confront the structural and cultural challenges that arise in its implementation. The resistance from entrenched elites, the difficulty of defining and measuring virtue, and the manipulation of the masses by populism are significant obstacles. However, these challenges offer opportunities for innovation. The ethical pre-qualification process, supported by transparent and objective evaluation criteria grounded in universally recognized human rights and environmental sustainability frameworks, demonstrates how virtue can be effectively measured. Independent peer review processes, as well as international oversight, ensure the integrity of the system, allowing for adaptations to local cultural and political contexts without compromising the core principles of justice, equity, and transparency. Through this, Aretocracy addresses the concern that the evaluation of virtue might be subjective or prone to manipulation, showing that ethical excellence is both measurable and implementable on a large scale.

Strengthening Democratic Legitimacy through Citizen Participation: One of Aretocracy's most distinctive features is its capacity to enhance democratic legitimacy through greater citizen participation. While the pre-qualification process might initially appear to restrict democratic freedom, it actually empowers citizens by ensuring that their choices are made from a pool of candidates who have already demonstrated high standards of ethics and competence. Involving the electorate in certain stages of the evaluation process—through participatory platforms or citizen review panels—fosters transparency and inclusivity, ensuring that the pre-qualification process is not seen as an imposition but as a tool for greater civic engagement. This participatory mechanism safeguards democracy by preventing the rise of unqualified or unethical leaders, and strengthens the relationship between the governed and those who govern.

A Global Model of Ethical Governance: The exploration of Aretocracy in international forums, such as the United Nations, underscores its potential to serve as a model for ethical governance on a global scale. As the world faces interconnected crises—ranging from environmental degradation to political corruption—Aretocracy provides a governance model that aligns leadership with universally accepted global goals, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Aretocracy offers a pathway

to ethical leadership where competence and virtue are inseparable, ensuring that leaders are not only equipped to manage complex challenges, but also morally aligned with the long-term well-being of humanity and the planet. In this sense, Aretocracy is not merely a theoretical framework, but a practical and scalable model that can be adapted to diverse political systems, promoting global ethical governance.

Cultural and Political Transformation: Aretocracy represents a cultural shift in political life, where integrity and competence become the fundamental requirements for leadership, rather than mere aspirations. This shift has the potential to reshape political culture at its core, fostering a societal expectation that leaders must be virtuous and competent, both in public and private life. By embedding ethical pre-qualification into the political process, Aretocracy encourages both citizens and leaders to cultivate ethical excellence as a matter of course. This transformation moves beyond the narrow confines of electoral cycles, embedding a long-term vision for governance that prioritizes the collective good over short-term political gain. Through this lens, Aretocracy fosters a political environment that not only addresses present-day crises but also anticipates future challenges with foresight and ethical responsibility.

Elevating Political Leadership through Pre-Qualification: The introduction of the pre-qualification process redefines the standards of political leadership. In Aretocracy, leaders are no longer selected solely based on popularity or partisan affiliation; they are chosen for their proven ethical character and technical competence. This shift represents a profound change in the nature of political leadership, where the qualities of virtue and moral integrity become prerequisites for holding office. The elevation of political leadership through pre-qualification ensures that those entrusted with making crucial decisions are not only qualified in their expertise, but also possess the ethical grounding necessary to make decisions in the best interest of the collective. This process creates a new era of political accountability and responsibility, where leaders are held to the highest moral and professional standards.

Harnessing Digital Technologies for Citizen Empowerment: In an era increasingly shaped by digital innovation, Aretocracy is uniquely positioned to integrate these technologies into its governance model. Digital platforms, including real-time feedback systems, AI-driven candidate evaluations, and transparent voting processes, can revolutionize the way citizens engage with their leaders. These tools offer continuous interaction between the electorate and their representatives, ensuring that governance aligns more closely with the ethical values of the population. By utilizing these technologies, Aretocracy not only fosters a more informed citizenry but also empowers individuals to actively participate in the political process, enhancing the legitimacy and accountability of leadership.

Redefining Political Representation: Aretocracy reimagines the very concept of political representation. It moves beyond the simple notion of majority rule, placing equal emphasis on the quality and virtue of those representing the people. In doing so, Aretocracy ensures that political leadership is not just representative of the electorate's numerical preferences but also embodies the ethical and moral aspirations

of society. This model creates space for more inclusive governance, where the voices and needs of minorities and marginalized communities are championed by leaders who are both competent and ethically accountable. In this way, Aretocracy addresses one of the fundamental flaws of traditional democratic systems, offering a more just and equitable approach to political representation.

Opportunities Amidst Implementation Challenges: The implementation of Aretocracy undoubtedly presents challenges, particularly in defining objective standards of virtue and ensuring consistent global adherence. Yet, these challenges also create unique opportunities for innovation in governance. Aretocracy opens new avenues for civic education, ethical assessments, and the development of global frameworks that prioritize virtue in leadership. It encourages a global dialogue on the foundational values that should guide governance in the 21st century, fostering collaboration across borders in the pursuit of ethical excellence. Through these efforts, Aretocracy not only addresses the deficiencies of current democratic systems but also sets the stage for the evolution of a more virtuous and effective global governance model.

Towards a Future of Ethical and Effective Governance: These conclusions highlight the transformative potential of Aretocracy as a solution to the crises facing modern democracies. By reinforcing democratic legitimacy through ethical pre-qualification and enhancing citizen participation through technological innovation, Aretocracy offers a path forward for governance that is both ethical and effective. As the world continues to confront complex challenges, Aretocracy provides a model for leadership that is rooted in virtue and committed to the common good, ensuring that future governance is not only competent but also morally grounded. In doing so, Aretocracy redefines what it means to lead, laying the foundation for a more just and sustainable future.

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