



Does Political Equality Require Equal Power? A Pluralist Account

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Abstract

In this paper, I criticize two views on how political equality is related to equally distributed political power, and I offer a novel, pluralist account of political equality to address their shortcomings—in particular, concerning their implications for affirmative action in the political domain, political representation, and the situation of permanent minorities. The Equal Power View holds that political equality requires equally distributed political power. It considers affirmative action—e.g., racial or gender electoral quotas—, representation, and more-than-equal power to permanent minorities *pro tanto* objectionable. The Equal Status View, in contrast, holds that political equality concerns equal relations and status, and it is only contingently related to equally distributed power. I argue that while the Equal Status View is right that equal power can be insufficient for—or even objectionable from the viewpoint of—political equality, it is wrong to conclude that equal power has no independent significance in an account of political equality. My pluralist account shows that political equality entails not only status-based requirements but also independent egalitarian requirements to distribute political power equally. This account provides a finer-grained understanding of affirmative action in the political domain. It justifies affirmative action but holds that it should only be used to realize equal political status until thorough-going social reform allows us to maintain both equal political status and equally distributed political power at the same time. Similarly, representation should be amended with power-balancing institutions, and permanent minorities should enjoy equal status with minimal compromise to power equality.

Keywords Affirmative Action in the Political Domain · Electoral Quotas · Permanent Minorities · Political Equality and Political Power · Relational Equality · Political Representation

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1 Introduction

What, if anything, does political equality have to do with equally distributed political power? This question has divided the literature on political equality in the past years, generating answers which, roughly, fall into two groups: everything or not much. Proponents of the former position, which I shall refer to as the Equal Power View (EPV), argue that political equality is about equalizing the distribution of—some appropriate measure of—political power between individuals. By contrast, proponents of the latter position, which I shall refer to as the Equal Status View (ESV), argue that political equality only bears a highly contingent and conditional relation to equally distributed political power; and that fundamentally, equal power is not and cannot be the right ‘metric’ of political equality as political equality has no metric at all. In this paper, I aim to show that both views miss something important about the nature and content of the ideal of political equality. I argue that while ESV is right to insist that in several circumstances, equal power is insufficient for—or even objectionable from the viewpoint of—political equality, it misses something very important about the moral significance of equal power motivating EPV.

By political equality, I mean an egalitarian ideal concerning the relations of the members of a political community to one another and concerning how members share political power. Note, however, that this definition only identifies the subject matter of political equality and not its content—i.e., not the moral requirements that it entails. The content of political equality is a matter of substantive normative debate, and I do not mean to settle this debate by conceptual stipulation (Moles and Parr 2019, pp. 134–136). Instead, I engage in the normative debate about the moral requirements of political equality and their implications for political institutions that involve power inequality.

The primary motivation of ESV for challenging EPV is that insisting on equally distributed power in all circumstances leads to highly objectionable outcomes, from an egalitarian viewpoint. I will not challenge this claim. I agree that affirmative action in the political domain is often justified (see, e.g., Bengtson 2020, 2022a, b; Mráz 2021); that we need representative institutions in democracies; and that permanent minorities are sometimes due more-than-equal power—all specifically on political egalitarian grounds. In these regards, my account builds on the findings of ESV. However, I will show that ESV throws the baby out with the bathwater: it is wrong to conclude that equal power has no independent moral significance in an account of political equality. On the contrary: I will show that political equality is a complex ideal, which entails status-based requirements but also (egalitarian) requirements concerning the proper distribution of political power that are not reducible to status-based claims.

This article makes three contributions to current debates on political equality. First, it offers a novel, pluralist theory of political equality which reveals internal tensions in this ideal. This account helps us see that not all concern with equal power is reducible to equal status; and also that our moral concerns with equal status and equal power, respectively, may potentially come into practical conflict with each other. Second, my pluralist account of political equality provides a fine-grained understanding of the normative complexity of affirmative action in the political domain, as well as of political representation, and of the situation of permanent minorities. It captures what is valuable on political egalitarian grounds about unequally distributed political power in all these cases. But the account I defend also makes new sense of the intuition (and generally evidenced political commit-

ment) that unequal power distributions have special justificatory burdens. Third, my account of political equality brings the rich recent debate on relational vs. distributive ideals of equality to bear on the study of political equality. This debate, while typically framed at a level of abstraction that does not explicitly restrict it to any particular domain, has overwhelmingly focused on questions of economic and social equality so far. It is time to reap its fruits for a more refined analysis of political equality as well.

The structure of this paper is as follows. In Sect. 2, I critically review the approach to political equality which attributes a central role to equal political power—i.e., EPV. I also present here three test cases of discrepancies between equal power and equal political status—affirmative action, political representation, and the situation of permanent minorities—which not only challenge EPV but should also guide all accounts of political equality. In Sect. 3, I reconstruct ESV and its implications regarding our three test cases to show that ESV still provides an impoverished moral perspective on these phenomena. In Sect. 4, then, I argue for an alternative, pluralist account of political equality. I establish that besides equal status, we also have an independent, fair share-based reason to value equally distributed political power, and I show how this can account for temporal limits on affirmative action. In Sect. 5, I offer an account of prioritization between equal status-based and fair share-based considerations of political equality, and show how this account can justify affirmative action. In Sect. 6, I show that my pluralist account has intuitively plausible and nuanced implications for evaluating political representation and the situation of permanent minorities. Section 7 concludes.

2 The Equal Power View and Its Critique

EPV holds the equal distribution of political power to be the central or exclusive requirement of political equality. This view covers a number of substantively diverse theories, which often disagree—among other matters—about what is the proper metric of political power: impact, influence (Dworkin 2000, pp. 191–194), opportunity for or availability of influence (Brighouse 1996), actual decisiveness (Kolodny 2014, p. 323) or a priori contributory influence (Kolodny 2014), or some unanalyzed, intuitive understanding of power (Wilson 2019), and so forth.

My argument will be robust across various plausible views on the metric of equal power distribution, though. For my purposes, what matters is what is common to proponents of EPV. In this section, I flesh out these common features in some detail. First, proponents of this view seem to agree, at least implicitly, that the egalitarian distributive requirement is not easily overridden or outweighed or excluded by other moral considerations. Second, however, EPV does not consider the egalitarian distributive requirement to be absolute. Thus, it need not consider all inequalities of power—for example, affirmative action or representative democracy—unjustified. Yet, third, EPV sees justified power inequalities as compromises to political equality for the sake of some other value, principle or right.

Proponents of various versions of EPV may ground the egalitarian distributive requirement concerning political power in a variety of considerations (see, e.g., Kolodny 2014, 304–307; Christiano 2008, pp. 75–130). Rather schematically, the structure of these arguments in favor of EPV follows this pattern:

P1: Power should be distributed so as to realize (constitute) / express equal political (social) status.

P2: Equal power is always necessary to realize (constitute) / express equal political (social) status.

C: Power should be distributed equally.

Critiques of EPV and proponents of ESV hold P2 to be false for various reasons.¹ A weaker version of their critique of EPV holds that equal power is not necessary for political equality. For example, John Stuart Mill (1861) (in)famously held that a plural voting scheme is not disrespectful of anyone—as it does not express anyone’s superior political status—if it tracks superior political judgment. Hence it is not generally true that equal power is necessary for political equality. A stronger version of the general critique holds that equal power is not merely unnecessary but positively detrimental, in some circumstances, to the realization of equal political status. For example, one may hold that given an individually equal distribution of political power, the working class cannot organize itself efficiently against the oligarchically ruling elites, detrimentally to the equal status of workers (Klein 2022).

Discrepancies between power equality and equal status are common in democracies. In the rest of this section, I review three common types of political inequality that will serve as test cases for the theories criticized and developed in the rest of the paper. All of these cases involve some discrepancy between equal political status and equally distributed political power.

First, consider *affirmative action*—in a narrow sense, understood as implementing quotas reserved for the purpose of reasonably increasing the representation of minorities or other disadvantaged groups (Lippert-Rasmussen 2020, pp. 12, 14).² Applied in the political domain, affirmative action quotas distribute political power unequally, typically by means of electoral quotas (see, e.g., Dahlerup 2006, Dworkin 2000; cf. Mráz 2021). Yet affirmative action in the political domain is intuitively permissible—or outright required—in democracies, at least in some circumstances. Moreover, intuitively, it is precisely a moral concern with political equality that motivates such affirmative action. For instance, members of a group with a history of exclusion such as women or racial minorities may be due more than equal political power for some time to ensure their equal status.³

¹ Recently, some critics of EPV also propose that equal power—especially if realized only at one stage or site of the political process—is not *sufficient* for political equality. For instance, because the “one person, one vote” principle—a paradigmatic realization of equally distributed power—only realizes equality in one moment of decision-making instead of realizing it throughout the political process, as political equality intuitively requires (Wilson 2019, p. 79). I take this to be true but irrelevant to EPV, which does not and need not insist on the sufficiency of equal power but only on its necessity for political equality. Nor does EPV need to entail a narrow site and scope of application for the equal power requirement. I believe this is a fair reconstruction of the view: e.g., I see no reason why Kolodny (2014) should deny the significance of equality in deliberation, given his arguments, whereas Brighouse (1996) and Christiano (2008) are explicit about its significance as well. Proponents of EPV do not say that a holistic egalitarian evaluation of the political process is irrelevant or unnecessary, but only that it cannot replace a more focused egalitarian evaluation of the distribution of power in decision-making.

² Other forms of affirmative action which do not involve the use of quotas—e.g., mentorship programs targeting disadvantaged minorities—do not raise the theoretical issues I am interested in; hence my focus on the narrower understanding of affirmative action.

³ In some cases, quotas and similar affirmative action measures do not give more-than-equal power to anyone but simply ensure that, on some proper metric, members of disadvantaged groups enjoy *the same* amount of power as members of other groups in the political community (see, e.g., Mráz 2021). In other cases, such

Second, *representation* typically involves power inequalities, but without necessarily violating equal status. Power inequalities are salient between members of the political community who do not hold any public office and those who are elected or appointed to hold one (Dworkin 2000, 190–191, 198–199; Landemore 2020; Wilson 2019; for a *locus classicus*, see Rousseau 1762/2002)—I assume that any plausible metric of political power would yield this judgment. However, representation need not bring about status inequalities between officeholders and other members of the political community (see, e.g., Dworkin 2000). Moreover, some theorists of political equality insist that representation can positively further the cause of status equality rather than undermining it (see, e.g., Kis 2009; Wilson 2019; Schemmel 2021; cf. Ingham 2022).

Third, consider the situation of the members of *permanent minorities*: such groups that cannot form coalitions with other groups without giving up their identity-constitutive political views and hence are predictably relegated to a minority position within the political community (cf. Christiano 2008, p. 289; Lee 2001). Most scholars of political equality acknowledge that members of permanent minorities have equal political power (see, e.g., Kolodny 2014, pp. 321–322, 328; Christiano 2008, pp. 289, 296); but the same amount of power is less valuable for them. Status egalitarians cash out this claim by noting that members of permanent minorities do not enjoy equal status unless they are granted more-than-equal political power.

Discrepancies between equal status and equal political power cut across the divide between non-ideal and ideal theory. While the meaning of these terms is widely debated (Valentini 2012; Volacu 2018), for the purposes of the present paper, I will use “non ideal theory” to refer to the set of principles applicable in circumstances of background injustices, whereas I will use “ideal theory” to refer to the set of principles applicable to circumstances free of background injustices. Which test cases belong to non-ideal and which one(s) to non-ideal theory so understood?

Affirmative action may be understood more or less broadly as encompassing measures exclusively in non-ideal or also in ideal theory. In this paper, I restrict my inquiry into the justification of affirmative action to such measures which aim to remedy or dismantle injustices, and which assume this to be possible. This focus is coherent with various accounts of affirmative action: it covers backward-looking (in Anderson’s [2010, pp. 135–137] helpful classification, compensatory), present-oriented (discrimination-blocking) and future-oriented (integrative) accounts. These all theorize affirmative action as a set of measures in non-ideal theory necessary until justice is realized (past discrimination is compensated, the habits and further ‘lingering’ social mechanisms causing current-day discrimination are eliminated, and social segregation undergirding unequal opportunities of disadvantaged groups is dismantled—respectively). Further, this focus is in line with both the ordinary language use of affirmative action (insofar as it has evolved as such, from a technical term) and the practice of affirmative action, at least in the political domain that I focus on (see also fn. 9 below).⁴

measures are still grounded in a concern for equal power but lead to power inequalities in the short run. For instance, if affirmative action aims to compensate for past injustices (e.g., Kershner 2004), then past inequalities of power may be compensated by means of ‘offsetting’ present inequalities of power. In contrast to both, I focus on cases of affirmative action that aims to realize equal status but where power equality and status equality do not require the same distribution of power.

⁴ Some accounts of affirmative action—notably, a purely diversity-oriented account (see Anderson 2010, 141–144)—need not belong to non-ideal theory exclusively. However, diversity-oriented accounts are bad

Yet not all discrepancies between equal power and equal status belong (exclusively and unambiguously) to non-ideal theory, as defined above. Theorists of political equality are divided about whether representation belongs to the ideal or non-ideal theory of democracy (Kolodny 2014 argues that delegate-style representation can fully realize justice; but cf. Ingham 2022). And it seems to be a consensual position that the existence of permanent minorities is a possibility in ideal theory too, as defined above. Thus, the existence of a discrepancy between equal status and equal power does not merely belong to the study of injustice but goes to the heart of the study of political equality even in ideal circumstances of justice. This insight underlines the significance of the theories which I will collectively refer to as the Equal Status View—and which try to cash out the requirements of political equality without a strong commitment to equally distributed political power.

3 The Equal Status View

The alternative set of theories developed in response to the critique reviewed in the previous section, grouped under the label “The Equal Status View” (ESV), take a rather different approach to the relationship between political equality and equal power. These otherwise no less diverse theories have a number of central features in common. First, while they share the fundamental egalitarian commitment of EPV, they hold that political equality is contingently related to the equal distribution of political power. Equal status must be realized in a context-sensitive manner, while the egalitarian distributive requirement of EPV is a rigid, context-insensitive requirement. Further, there may not even be a particularly strong relationship between equal status and equal power distribution; hence diverging from the latter does not incur a special burden of justification. Equal power is not the default implication of political equality—instead, it is merely one of its possible implications (see, e.g., Bengtson 2022a, b; Wilson 2019). For instance, Bengtson (2022b) even argues that on relational egalitarian grounds, “we, as democrats, should be less wedded to ‘one person, one vote’ than is usually assumed.” (p. 16). Second, though, proponents of ESV need not deny that an equal distribution of power is morally desirable or even required in a wide range of cases. They merely insist on the contingent (rather than necessary) nature of the relationship between political equality and the distribution of political power. For instance, Schemmel (2021) argues against the view that “power should be shared equally in decision-making because, even if it should reliably lead to worse outcomes in terms of justice than some other procedure, it still constitutes a valuable way of living together as equals” (p. 211).

ESV includes theories that disagree among themselves about the grounds of political equality: the emphasis may be on egalitarian relationships or their significance for social or political status, on equal basic respect, or on non-domination (for discussion, see Viehoff 2019; Wilson 2019; Schemmel 2021). For my argument, these otherwise significant disagreements can be set aside. In the rest of the paper, for expository ease, I will simply refer to “equal status” as the relevant ground of political equality according to this set of views. Further, proponents of these theories also disagree on whether equal status should be expressed (e.g., Beitz 1989, Christiano 2008) or constituted (e.g., Klein 2022) by the realization of political equality. I will remain neutral to this debate too. Thus, the skeletal argumentative scheme in support of ESV can be reconstructed along the following lines:

fits with most of the specifically political practices of affirmative action.

P1: Power should be distributed so as to realize (constitute) / express equal political (social) status.

P2: Equal power sometimes—but not always—realizes (constitutes) / expresses equal political (social) status.

C: When it does not, we have no reason to distribute power equally.

How does ESV cope with our test cases? First, it finds no difficulty in justifying affirmative action in the political domain even if such measures result in a less—rather than more—equal distribution of political power. In fact, ESV goes further than merely justifying affirmative action in the political domain. It offers such a robust justification of affirmative action that it fails to even make sense of objections to it on egalitarian grounds. In Anderson's (2010) view, "as long as discrimination or its effects persist, there will be innocent victims suffering unjust burdens. The only question is whether these burdens should be borne exclusively by disadvantaged racial groups or more widely shared. There is no injustice in sharing the costs of widespread injustice" (pp. 139–140).⁵ Objections to affirmative action in the political domain must be based on the—wrong—Equal Power View, on this approach, and hence must be without any merit, as proponents of ESV would find. Although ESV is correct to conclude that there are cases of justified affirmative action in the distribution of political power, it is too quick to dispel distributive objections as entirely meritless. In the next Section, I will show that even if some of the critique of EPV is well-founded, the latter view still has a moral core which should not be disregarded—and proper regard for this core leads to a more complex view of both political equality and affirmative action in the political domain.

Similar implications follow from ESV with regard to our further test cases: representation and permanent minorities. ESV does not see anything objectionable about representation: it recognizes the power inequality that representation incurs but it does not find this inequality concerning as the latter need not correlate with status inequality (see, e.g., Dworkin 2000, p. 191; Ingham 2022; Wilson 2019, p. 80–83, 116–142). Moreover, as this power inequality may be necessary to contribute to substantively just (egalitarian) political decisions on complex matters, it may overall enhance equal respect, non-domination, and equal status (Schemmel 2021, pp. 215–217).

Finally, ESV does not find granting members of permanent minorities more than equal political power *pro tanto* objectionable if that guarantees their equal political status. For instance, applying Schemmel's (2021) view, members of the majority (or other non-permanent minorities) presumably do not suffer either domination or a violation of equal basic respect for their moral judgment if members of a permanent minority have more-than-equal power as necessary to avoid others dominating them.

While these judgments are insightful and intuitively plausible as all things considered evaluations, they also leave us with a significantly impoverished understanding of the normative significance of power inequalities. This is what I aim to remedy with a more complex account of political equality that I lay out in the next sections.

⁵ Cf. Scanlon (2018) on losses incurred in the process of eliminating status inequality: "To say that such losses are morally irrelevant is not to deny that they are psychologically powerful" (p. 28).

4 The Plurality of Political Equality

In order to make progress in our moral understanding of power inequalities, I believe we must shift our attention from the different second premises of the respective schematic arguments for EPV and ESV to their shared first premise: that *power should be distributed so as to realize (constitute) / express equal political (social) status*. I do not wish to challenge the truth of that premise. Equal status should indeed be one of the reasons to determine the distribution of political power. But should political power be distributed only with this single moral concern in mind? Proponents of ESV as well as those proponents of EPV who hold the latter view based on relational egalitarian grounds (such as Kolodny 2014) appear to assume so. Yet should a concern with relational equality and equal status be the only one relevant to political equality? In this section, I argue that it should not be: we have further reasons for establishing and maintaining political equality; and these further reasons also ground an egalitarian distributive requirement.

In order to lay the grounds for my argument, let me first make what may seem a detour into an analogous debate that has taken place recently between distributive and relational egalitarians. In this debate, some argue that economic and social justice yields clear distributive requirements (Cohen 1989; Dworkin 2000), whereas others hold that it cannot, and it is best seen as the context-dependent requirements of relational equality for the economic and social domain (Lippert-Rasmussen 2018, Scheffler 2015). As more recent contributions to this debate establish, this is a false dilemma. There is both logical room and substantive moral reason to hold pluralistic or ‘hybrid’ views which reflect the multiplicity of egalitarian reasons that bear on the distribution of social and economic resources (Miklosi 2018; Moles and Parr 2019). For example, as regards economic resources, we have solid egalitarian reasons for their equal distribution even beyond ensuring equal status. Individuals have equally important life plans, and (at least some) economic resources are largely seen to be permissible and even necessary means to pursue these—at least in a capitalist or property-owning democracy (Miklosi 2018; cf. Dworkin 2000). If this is so, can we also reach similar conclusions in the political domain?

The question arises because ESV developed as a critique of EPV somewhat analogously to the development of relational egalitarian theories of justice as critiques of distributive egalitarian theories of justice (such as liberal egalitarianism, luck egalitarianism, and so forth—see, e.g., Cohen 1989, Dworkin 2000). The analogy is only partial, mostly because at least some—if not most—proponents of EPV are themselves relational egalitarians (or can be considered as forerunners of relational egalitarianism) and hold that it is precisely (what we call today) relational egalitarian standards that justify the strict distributive requirements of political equality (e.g., Beitz 1989, Kolodny 2014). Thus, the debate between ESV and EPV can also be read as an internal debate among relational egalitarians about the implications of their shared foundations. Consider, for instance, Christian Schemmel’s (2021) view: “[t]he task of a conception of relational equality [...] is that of structuring relations of power and status between individuals so as to express [proper] respect” for participants of social cooperation (60). In this sense, the main question seems to be what distribution of power is justified on relational egalitarian grounds. Yet I aim to challenge this reading here by arguing that there is a further, independent ground for a political egalitarian concern with equal power beyond relational equality. Thus, analogously to pluralism about economic and

social equality, the normative landscape requires a genuinely pluralistic account of political equality.

The starting point for such an account is the insight that egalitarian considerations concerning resources should apply to political power too. This becomes more evident once we make it explicit that resources used as means of political influence just *are* political power.⁶ Resources available to be used as means of political influence—such as votes cast for or time dedicated to canvassing for a candidate, or money donated to a political party’s campaign—are ‘dual-purpose’ goods. First, they can be used for the pursuit of a conception of the common good / justice that proponents of this conception aim to authoritatively impose on the political community. For example, a voter may use her vote to select a candidate supporting what she sees as a just economic reform platform, or she could try and oust a candidate she sees as pursuing a horridly unjust policy package.

Second, resources used as means of political influence can also be used in pursuit of a conception of the good. For example, dedicating time to canvassing for a candidate, or even getting nominated as a candidate, can also be a career choice based on a conception of the good that includes a politically active, community-oriented or leadership-oriented life. While the use of resources as a means of political influence for the pursuit of a conception of justice or the common good is less controversial (see, e.g., Brennan 2016), I assume here that such a use of resources for the pursuit of a conception of the good is not per se morally objectionable either (see, e.g., Lever 2016). Further, if such an exercise of power is reconcilable with egalitarian relations among members of the political community, then there is nothing objectionable about the latter pursuing political careers in order to realize their own conception of the good. (But more on this follows in the next section.) Nor is it objectionable, if this condition holds, to use political power to realize a conception of the good that has little to do with a political career. For example, one’s conception of the good might concern the provision of good education for one’s children—and to realize that, one may wish to use one’s resources to shape public views on and institutions of education. In other words: it makes little sense to distinguish between the political and personal use of resources, since resources used as means of political influence can be and often just *are* resources used for personal pursuits (too) at the same time. This is significant for our purposes as it also sheds light on why the debate on distributive vs. relational egalitarian justice is relevant to the debate about the grounds and content of political equality.

If we have good reasons to assume that relational equality is not the *only* relevant consideration for an egalitarian resource distribution in general, then we have good reasons to assume this holds for resources (available to be) used as means of political influence as well. This has little to do with them being used for specifically *political* purposes or as means of political influence, and more to do with the fact that people need resources to pursue their conceptions of justice or the common good as much as their conceptions of the good in resource-scarce contexts. When a conception of the good includes political activities, it evidently cannot be successfully pursued without resources the use of which amounts to exercising political influence. But even apolitical conceptions of the good may be permissibly

⁶ This formulation may appear to commit me to a particular conception of political power—namely, political influence. However, I invite readers committed to some other conception of political power to replace “political influence” with their favored conception in this formulation. I do not deny that my formulation excludes some implausibly narrow conceptions of political power; for example, a conception which understands only votes as political power cannot be incorporated into this formulation. Still, the formulation is robust across a number of different conceptions of political power.

pursued using resources as means of political influence. From the point of view of justice, people should have access to a fair share of resources necessary for realizing a conception of justice or common good as much as a conception of the good. Hence, people should have a fair share of political power understood as resources available to be used as means of political influence. That fair share should typically be an equal share, as people's lives—and the realization of their conceptions of the good—matter equally (Dworkin 2000).⁷ Thus, we have reached a distributive requirement of political equality that is not grounded in equal status but in an independent concern with fair resource shares. This concern can be further specified in different—e.g., Dworkinian or Rawlsian—liberal egalitarian accounts which attribute independent moral significance to equal respect for individuals' conceptions of the good and attribute distributive implications to such respect.

This move makes practical conflict possible between equal status-based and fair share-based requirements of political equality. Both requirements bear on the distribution of political power. Yet equal status may require *unequal* distributions of political power, whereas the fair-share based consideration requires equal distributions.

Can a variety of ESV incorporate this pluralism? Notably, Schemmel's (2021) relational egalitarianism has a dual concern with equal basic respect for the sense of justice of each member of the political community, on the one hand, and with non-domination, on the other. Both moral concerns have implications for the distribution of political power (ibid., 208). Further, Schemmel holds that equal power distributions should be upheld unless they have been shown to upset relational justice (ibid., 219).

However, first, Schemmel's view is concerned with a distribution of political power only as a way to respect members of the political community as persons with a sense of justice or to ensure non-domination. My account, in contrast, also grounds a concern with equal power in respect for persons with a conception of the good (see, e.g., Miklosi 2018). Such respect need not be—and on my view, is not—grounded in relational egalitarian concerns. Instead, it is grounded in equal respect for persons with moral powers that can be successfully exercised by using external resources—among them, political power. Second and related, on Schemmel's (2021) view, our concern with equal power is conditional on egalitarian political procedures being conducive to (relational) justice overall (p. 211). My account implies no such conditionality: compromises to power equality are *pro tanto* objectionable. Thus, while Schemmel's variety of ESV is internally pluralistic about what relational egalitarianism requires, this restricted pluralism does not extend beyond relational egalitarian concerns, unlike my account.⁸

⁷ In some cases, a 'fair share' that constitutes equal political power may consist in a more-than equal share. Consider persons living with disabilities—who may turn resources into political influence less efficiently than persons without disabilities—see, e.g., Sen 1979, pp. 215–216. Further, whatever share constitutes equal power, on my account, we should also ask what distribution of power is necessary for the equal status of persons living with disabilities. Plausibly, such members of a society should have more-than-equal power for equal status. For further complications specifically concerning mental disability and political equality, see Mráz 2023, pp. 362–364; Mráz 2020, p. 273–276.

⁸ My account is also different from other pluralist accounts. Notably, Walzer (1984) holds that different egalitarian (or other distributive) ideals and requirements apply to different domains (such as political competition, economic exchange etc.), and that political equality does not require equal power (8–11, 17, 303–304, 309). My account, in contrast, implies pluralism about the egalitarian requirements that apply specifically in the political domain, including equal power. Further, I assume, *pace* Walzer, that both fair shares and equal status are egalitarian concerns that apply across different domains. In these respects, I am closer to Thomas Scanlon's (2018) pluralist egalitarianism, holding that equality in the political domain is irreducible to a

Let us see, then, how my pluralist account deals with our test cases. Take, first, affirmative action: for example, a measure that increases the political power of women at the expense of the political power of men. A convincing justification for this measure, based on equal political status, is that in our vastly non-ideal circumstances, women need more political power to establish egalitarian relations and equal status in our society. ESV would hence see this unequal power distribution justified. But it cannot tell why such measures should be *temporary*—a widely shared intuition among their proponents and political supporters (Dahlerup 2006; Mráz 2021, pp. 308–309).⁹

ESV may hold that equal power is not necessary to realize equal status in circumstances of injustice—but necessary to realize it in circumstances of justice. Thus, the temporariness of affirmative action which realizes equal status by unequal power seems justified: once injustice is overcome, equal power becomes necessary to realize equal status. However, this position is hard to maintain. True, once injustice has been overcome, affirmative action is no longer required on ESV. But that is not enough for in-principle temporariness—we also need to show that affirmative action is not permissible in just circumstances. This is where ESV has a harder time: it must assume that affirmative action is either necessary to achieve or maintain equal status or else it violates equal status. But that may not hold. Imagine a hypothetical Nordic country where gender quotas in national legislatures are not necessary anymore to maintain equal political status for women. It is unclear why they should, at once, violate men’s equal political status if their aim nonetheless is to maintain already achieved equality, and hence why they should be impermissible, on ESV.

In contrast, once we recognize the plurality of political egalitarian considerations, we can readily justify both affirmative action *and* its temporary nature. Justification requires prioritizing between equal status-based and fair share-based considerations—let me set that aside for the next section. Here I merely show how the pluralist account can respond to the challenge of temporariness. My pluralist account values the equal distribution of political power for reasons unrelated to equal status (too). For reasons outlined above, this distribution matters *pro tanto* even if, all things considered, affirmative action is justified because equal status-based considerations prevail. Thus, affirmative action remains *pro tanto* objectionable—i.e., impermissible. Of course, it should not always be avoided. But we should ultimately replace affirmative action with measures which realize equal status in conformity with fair shares in the distribution of political power. I consider this to be an intuitively appealing, progressive implication: the account is more clearly committed to thoroughgoing social and political reform in response to status inequalities than ESV.

single egalitarian requirement. However, we identify different wrongs of political inequality. Scanlon focuses on violations of equal opportunity for political influence, and aims to show that they do not capture all wrongs of political inequality: some have more to do with officeholders’ lack of equal concern for all members of the political community (ibid., 88, 93; cf. Walzer 1984, 283)—i.e., with the abuse of power rather than its maldistribution. My account, in contrast, is pluralistic about the grounds and requirements of distributing political power.

⁹ See *General Recommendation No. 25*, on article 4, paragraph 1, of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, on temporary special measures, ¶ 22, U.N. Doc. A/59/38 (SUPP) (Mar. 18, 2004): “preferential treatment; targeted recruitment, hiring and promotion; numerical goals connected with time frames; and quota systems” are specifically referred to as “temporary special measures”.

5 Prioritization: Equal Status v. Equal Power on the Pluralist Account

So far, we have seen that the pluralist account of political equality can account for one aspect of our first test case: namely, the intuition that affirmative action should be temporary. But I still owe an account of why affirmative action is justified overall on this account. This requires me to show how the two concerns at the core of my pluralist account—equal status and fair shares—should be prioritized. This is what I will now turn to.

At least one motivation for ESV can also explain why equal status enjoys priority over the fair share-based consideration. ESV as a conception of political equality is strongly motivated by the insight that the exercise of political power can only be justified if exercised in accordance with equal status (cf., e.g., Kolodny 2014, p. 298, 304–306, Wilson 2019, pp. 97–105). This is a permissibility constraint on any exercise of political power that I will refer to as *the equal status constraint* (cf. Kolodny 2014, pp. 291, 313). If that constraint is met, members of the political community may use political power as a means to realize their conceptions of the good. But the equal status constraint must be met first: then we can apply the fair share-based consideration explored above within this constraint. Still, the fair share-based consideration counts against an unequal distribution regardless of whether it is in accordance with equal status.

To see how prioritization works, let us first see how it provides us with a robust defense of affirmative action—but not an unconstrained one. It is robust as it excludes trade-offs between equal status-based and fair-share-based considerations, and hence allows for the full normative realization of equal status-based affirmative action measures that result in unequal power distributions. Yet this defense of affirmative action recognizes a residual requirement that counts against such measures: namely, that the distribution of political power should not only be coherent with equal status but it should also respect fair shares. Hence the justification for the temporary nature of affirmative action outlined in the previous section.

This account of prioritization also responds to the concern that there is something objectionable about using resources as political power. My pluralist account does not consider it generally objectionable to use resources *for political influence* in order to realize one's conception of justice or even one's conception of the good. But it can capture the grain of truth there is in this intuition. The exercise of political power to realize one's conception of justice or one's conception of the good should be constrained. On this account, the reason for this is that the distribution of political power is also a vast source of status inequalities—and a potentially effective remedy for them. Hence, my account assumes that the use of resources to exert political influence for the purpose of realizing one's conception of justice or one's conception of the good is problematic only if it is objectionable from the perspective of status inequality. Once status equality is guaranteed, the use of resources as means of political influence—political power—is no longer objectionable.

6 Equal Status and Long-Standing Power Inequalities

In the previous sections, I used the test case of affirmative action and its temporal limits to show the pluralist theory of political equality I have outlined at work. Now I will turn to our remaining test cases which need not or do not assume the existence of any background injustice.

Representation as a source of discrepancy between status equality and equality of power is at least often seen as an institution firmly embedded into a just democratic institutional context. How does the pluralist account evaluate representation? Status equality may require forms of structured deliberation and a certain quality of political decision-making that is only possible in modern mass democracies if legislative power is exercised via representation (e.g., Ingham 2022; Kis 2009; Schemmel 2021; Wilson 2019). If status equality takes priority—as I argued in the previous section—then the political community should exercise legislative power by representation despite the power inequalities that it brings about.

Still, a pluralist approach to political equality points to some losses we incur and limits we should impose on political representation. First, it offers some guidance as to how we should organize representative institutions: in such a way as to minimize compromising the equal distribution of political power. For example, my account shows that between the alternatives of a purely representative regime and a regime of political power which complements representation with institutions that counterbalance the power inequalities of representation, the latter is morally superior from the perspective of political equality. Fair share-based considerations *pro tanto* require, for example, that institutions such as recalls (Welp and Whitehead 2020), popular initiatives (voter-initiated referendums) (el-Wakil and Cheneval 2018)—or less realistically, an agent-principal (delegate) mode of political representation (Kolodny 2014, p. 317)—counterbalance the inequalities of representation. Second, even if we have conclusive reasons to maintain representative democracies, my pluralist account makes normative sense of the *pro tanto* loss that the power inequalities of representation bring about. These inequalities may not be unjust overall, but they can remind us that political equality might not be fully realizable.

Permanent minorities pose a challenge to democratic theory precisely because—given their numbers and identity-constrained potential for coalition-formation—the equal status of their members cannot be maintained unless they enjoy more-than-equal power. For them, even after background injustices are remedied, equal status may require unequal power—in principle, indefinitely. This outcome accords with political practice, but it may seem to imply that the pluralist account is redundant in their case. As equal status enjoys priority, it cannot justify a temporal limit on the unequal distribution of political power for permanent minorities: the fair share-based consideration appears to have no action-guiding role.

Still, two implications of my pluralist account of political equality for permanent minorities are worth pointing out to qualify this picture. First, fair share-based considerations are not entirely inert here either: they require that power should be distributed unequally only if that is a necessary means to realize the equal status of the members of permanent minorities. If other institutional solutions are available to guarantee their equal status, such solutions should be prioritized according to my pluralist account. Second, besides this necessity constraint, the fair share-based requirement of my pluralist account is evaluatively informative even if not action-guiding. True, if it is impossible to realize the equal status of some members of the political community, even in principle, without unequally distributing

political power, then—assuming ought implies can—we have no duty to distribute political power equally. Nevertheless, if this is the case, my account can explain what is normatively challenging about the existence of permanent minorities. Even if, for obvious reasons, we should not even attempt to turn permanent minorities into minorities that are politically less insular, we face a *pro tanto* loss of value as their equal status is guaranteed, in terms of the fair shares aspect of political equality. Where the equal status of the members of permanent minorities can only be guaranteed at the expense of equally distributing political power, political equality cannot be fully realized—although my account leaves no doubt about which aspect of it should be fully realized in such circumstances.

7 Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued for a pluralist account of political equality that sheds new light on discrepancies between equal political status and equally distributed political power—among such discrepancies, on affirmative action in the political domain, political representation, and the situation of permanent minorities. Political equality is, to a vast extent and before all else, about equal status. But it is not *just* about that. It is also about distributing equally political power as a resource to further the realization of equal individuals' conceptions of justice, common good—and their conceptions of the good.

The account presented here shows that political equality is an ideal burdened with internal tensions. It cannot be fully realized, in some circumstances, because the requirements of equal political status and a fair share of political power, respectively, can come into practical conflict: they cannot always be fully realized at the same time. This internal tension often is a result of past or present injustices—but far from always. Even in just background circumstances, political equality remains to be a complex ideal—which makes it all the richer as a guide to designing democratic institutions.

My argument for a pluralist account of political equality also shows that the debate about the significance of equal power for political equality is not merely an internal debate between relational egalitarians or status egalitarians about the requirements of equal social and political status. Political equality is not only grounded in equal status—even if that aspect of it enjoys moral priority. The equal distribution of political power is morally significant independently of equal status too, and the reasons for this independent significance should shape political institutions from affirmative action quotas to representative institutions to additional political power granted to permanent minorities.

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Declarations

Conflict of Interest No conflicts of interest beyond the above funding declaration.

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