**Democratic Equality.** By James Lindley Wilson. Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019. 320p. $39.95 / £34.00 hardcover.

Ben Saunders, *University of Southampton*

Democracy is commonly understood to require universal and equal inclusion in decision-making, but neither universality nor equality is straightforward. This book addresses the latter. Its first part (chapters 1-6) offers a general theory of political equality, while its second part (chapters 7-11) considers the implications of this for institutional design. This organisation recalls Charles Beitz’s classic *Political Equality: An Essay in Democratic Theory* (1989), so it is interesting that he was the adviser of the doctoral dissertation from which this book was developed. Moreover, both books proceed by applying theories developed elsewhere to the realm of democracy. However, whereas Beitz took inspiration from Scanlon’s contractualism, Wilson’s account of political equality is more indebted to ‘relational’ egalitarianism.

According to relational egalitarians, such as Elizabeth Anderson, it matters little—if at all—whether citizens enjoy exact equality of economic or material goods. Rather, what is important is that all enjoy equal status. This might rule out extremes of material inequality, on the basis that they are likely to lead to status hierarchies, but it is compatible with some being richer than others, provided these differences of wealth do not upset equal relations.

Wilson takes a similar approach towards political equality. He argues that it is a mistake to think of this simply as an equal distribution of political power, as embodied in slogans like ‘one person, one vote’. These attempts to understand political equality in terms of equal power are dogged by problems, such as accounting for the inequality between ordinary citizens and their elected representatives. While one approach to resolving this difficulty is to focus only on equality during electoral moments, Wilson argues that this is unsatisfactory, for it neglects the periods of deliberation and agenda-formation that occur between elections. Suppose, for instance, that all citizens have equally weighty votes, but the voices of ethnic minorities are routinely ignored in deliberation and media coverage. Such violations of political equality are not easily captured by equal power approaches.

Having criticised those who focus on some form of equal power, Wilson turns to developing a positive picture of democratic equality, requiring equal consideration of all citizens at all points in the political process. Again, ‘equality’ here should not be understood as meaning that there is some thing—consideration, rather than power—that citizens have equal shares of. Some inequalities are permissible, and perhaps even desirable, in a democratic system. For instance, if there are certain judgements that are particularly urgent or likely to be neglected, then it may be appropriate to design institutions to ensure that these views do get an adequate hearing (p. 162). Conversely, the views of a numerical majority may not need airtime in proportion to their popular support, once they have had an adequate hearing. In some respects, this view is sufficientarian, but it requires relations of equality; all citizens are taken, equally, as authoritative judges and none are degraded or dismissed.

What does this mean in practice? That is the focus of the second part of the book. It is worth noting that, though this is a work of political theory, the concerns explored here are largely American ones: the Electoral College, judicial review, and racial gerrymandering all figure. This might not be entirely bad, since the American system is probably at least somewhat familiar even to non-American readers. However, there is a certain parochialism about these debates. The absence of other things that might have been discussed, such as regional autonomy or compulsory voting, may largely be down to their not figuring very highly in American consciousness. Moreover, though Wilson also discusses proportional representation and the influence of money on elections, which are topics of wider concern, even these issues seem to be considered in an American context.

The choice of some of these examples may seem strange for other reasons. For instance, it probably strikes many readers, American and non-American alike, that the Electoral College is *obviously* contrary to political equality and therefore not requiring extensive discussion. As it happens, Wilson agrees that it violates political equality, but the purpose of discussing it is to show that his general theory of political equality can accommodate this intuition. Recall, Wilson thinks that departures from equal power are sometimes justifiable; in particular, they may be required to prevent certain minority viewpoints from being neglected. Thus, one may think that this validates the composition of the US Senate and Electoral College. However, though inequalities of power can be justified sometimes, this does not mean that such inequalities always are justified. Wilson argues that there is no particular reason to think inhabitants of small states are more likely to have their views neglected than inhabitants of larger states.

The discussion turns more provocative when Wilson goes on to reject the widespread view that equality requires proportional representation (PR). Single member districts, he argues, are compatible with sufficient consideration for all, so need not result in deliberative neglect nor involve any degrading judgements (p. 198). Provided that all receive due consideration, he sees no inherent unfairness in a minority of voters winning a majority of seats (p. 211). To be sure, this is *not* an argument *against* PR, but only an argument that it is not a general requirement of equality. For Wilson, the choice between PR and single member districts needs to be sensitive to contextual circumstances. However, it is notable that he opposes PR to *territorial* single member districts in particular.

There is no necessary reason why voters should be represented according to where they live. It would theoretically be possible to assign representatives to constituencies on non-geographical bases, such as occupation, age, or random selection. Representing people territorially, as opposed to on some other basis, may be both convenient and traditional, but it also favours geographically-concentrated groups over those whose support is more dispersed. For instance, in the 2019 UK general election, the Scottish National Party won 48 seats with only 1,242,380 votes (less than 26,000 votes per seat), whereas the Green Party won only one seat with 865,697 votes. Had the Greens converted votes into seats with the same efficiency as the SNP, then they would have had 33 seats. In other words, each SNP voter has 33 times the representation of each Green voter. While Wilson is doubtless right that being represented by someone that you voted for does not, in itself, guarantee anything, it still seems troubling to me that certain issues receive considerably more attention that others simply because of the geographical concentration of supporters. Perhaps Wilson would agree that there is a stronger case for proportional representation in such contexts, but it may be that his focus on the US—which is even more dominated by two parties than the UK—leads him to neglect such issues.

While, as a non-American, I did find the heavy focus on the US occasionally off-putting, this book still makes a timely contribution to the literature. It offers both a novel theory of democratic equality, which rejects the common notion of equal power, and spells out some of its implications for democratic institutions.