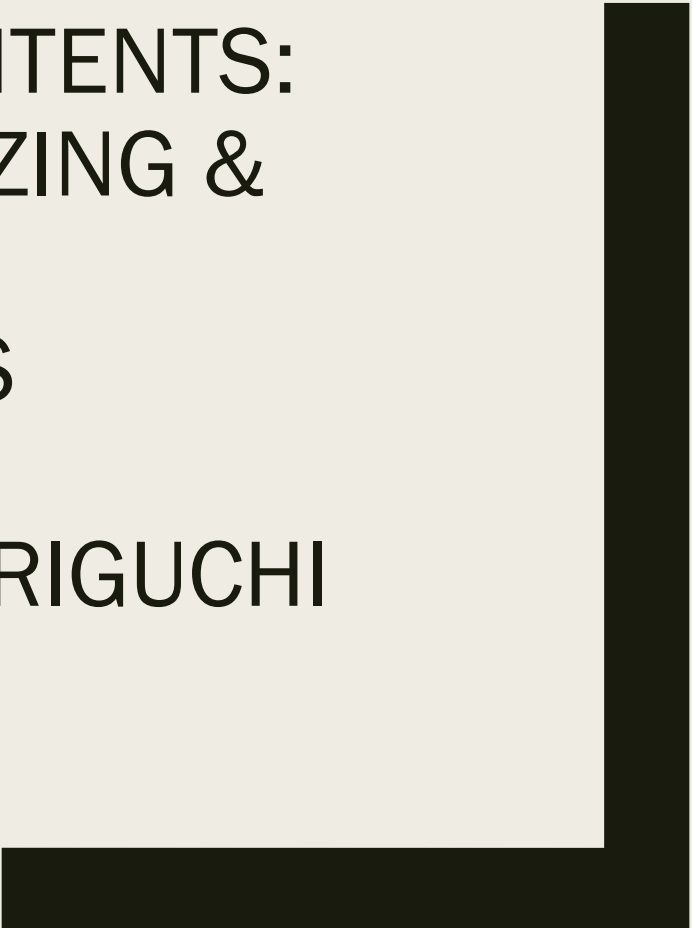


MERITOCRACY & ITS DISCONTENTS:  
EVIDENCE FROM CENTRALIZING &  
DECENTRALIZING  
SCHOOL ADMISSIONS

BY TANAKA, NARITA, AND MORIGUCHI

Discussion by  
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# Fascinating study!

- Study the effect of centralized admissions of “elite” National Higher School (NHS: 官立高等学校) in Meiji Japan on regional equity in the short and long run.
  - Exploited *bidirectional quasi-experiments*.  
Decent (1893) → Cent (1902) → Decent (1908)
  - Tracked down the *centralized assignment rule* and *enrollment data* to study regional distribution
  - Examined the *JPIR (=who's who in Japan)* for the long-term effects 2-3 decades after the “exposure” to centralization.

# Striking findings!

Tradeoff b/w **meritocracy** & **equal regional access** to higher ed:

## Short-run Effects

1. Centralization led more applicants to rank the top school (一高) and increased inter-regional application.
2. **Centralization increased # of urban applicants admitted to NHS by 10%**  
(∴ High-ability app.s more likely to be from urban areas)

## Long-run Effects

**40 yrs later, centralization increased # of urban-born (and urban-residing) career elites by 10-20%**

Some comments...

# 1. Simple Intuition:

- **Decentralization:** can effectively apply to only one school.
  - *Risk forces students to self-select for lesser schools.*
- **Centralization**---particularly **Rule #1**---allowed those who apply for top school (School 1: 一高) to compete for lesser “elite” schools (Schools 2, 4-8) when rejected by the top school. This leads to:
  1. *More applying to top schools (knowing that there is insurance)*
  2. *More of those rejected by the top school competing for, and crowd out, those students who would have faced no competition.*

# Centralized Assignment Algo

1. In the order of exam score, select the same # app.s as the sum of all school capacities

Built-in  
Meritocracy

1. For app.s selected in 1, in order of exam score, assign each app to the 1st choice school til the school capacity is filled

2. For app.s selected in 1 but not assigned in 2, in the order of exam score, assign each app to 2nd choice school til the school capacity is filled

3. The process is repeated.

Immediate  
Acceptance  
(Boston) algo

# Example:

- Two NHSs: School 1 (Tokyo) and School 2 (Sendai) each **with one seat**.
- Three students: T1 & T2 from Tokyo, and S from Sendai.

Student payoffs

School\Student	T1	T2	S
School 1 (Tokyo)	5	5	5
School 2 (Sendai)	1	1	2
None NHS	0	0	0

- students: The students' exam scores are realized *uniform randomly*.
- Students apply **before** they take exams:
  - Under *Decentralization*: T1 and T2 both apply to 1 and S applies to 2. S always takes 2.
  - Under *Centralization*: All three apply to 1 first, and then 2. School 2 is assigned to Tokyo student with prob  $2/3$ .

## 2. Are rural applicants worse off from centralization?

- Tokyo-born crowd out rural NHS in “quantity”.
- But how about quality? **Not necessarily!!**

School\Student	T1	T2	S
School 1 (Tokyo)	5	5	5
School 2 (Sendai)	1	1	2
None NHS	0	0	0

- Under *Decentralization*: S gets 2
- Under *Centralization*: S gets  $7/3 = 5*(1/3) + 2*(1/3) + 0*(1/3)$ .



### 3. Meritocracy may not just harm equity, it could harm efficiency!

- Meritocratic admissions may harm efficiency and welfare:
  - *The “Commons” problem in college admissions (Che, Kim, Kim and Tercieux, 2019):*
  - *Students compete for more prestigious/higher quality college or major, by sacrificing their horizontally differentiated preferences (e.g., location, aptitude).*
  - *Merit-based assignment [e.g., more informative tests or multiple choices as in DA] intensifies such competition, distorts allocation in terms of horizontal preferences.*

## 4. General lesson of “centralization”?

- The lesson is limited to a **specific type** of centralization, not applicable to other forms of centralization.
- Centralized matching can be designed to protect the regional interest.
  - *Just removing **Rule #1** and applying IA could protect the interests of rural applicants better.*

## 5. More than a history lesson!: Discontent of Meritocracy; Present day NYC “Exam” Schools.

- 8 Elite exam schools: Stuyvesant, Bronx Sci, Brooklyn Tech,....
- Racial inequity:

AY 2016-17	Black and Hispanic	White and Asian
Student Population	66.72%	31.49%
Exam Schools Student Body	10.86%	86.69%

## 5. More than a history lesson!: Discontent of Meritocracy; Present day NYC.

- NYC Specialized High School Reform (proposed by De Blasio and Carranza) would change the admissions from exam/DA-based assignment to Texas top 10% style (which is **less meritocratic**).
- Nguyen (2019): *Unfortunately, no natural experiments....*

Great paper!

*Thank you for the opportunity to  
discuss the paper.*