

Political Elites and Democracy

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According to the early elite theorists, whose views are examined in Chap. 2, the introduction to this handbook section, and in Chaps. 3 and 4, a direct form of democracy is impossible in any large bureaucratic organization, let alone in a large, complex, and bureaucratically structured nation-state. Large organizations and nation-states invariably spawn steep power hierarchies and political elites—individuals and small, relatively cohesive, stable groups with disproportionate power to affect organizational or national outcomes. The early elite theorists gave numerous reasons for this: differing individual endowments and talents, social traditions, inequalities of wealth, an “iron law of oligarchy.” They observed that, as a matter of historical fact, elites have existed in every society, whether agricultural, industrial, or post-industrial; capitalist or socialist; autocratic or democratic.

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The early elite theorists highlighted, in particular, the existence of political elites in ostensible democracies. Although members and factions making up such political elites compete for electoral mandates to govern, they are in reality ruling minorities who impose themselves on voters, dominate government, and enjoy the privileges that go with it. Exponents of democratic theory, especially neo-classical theorists of democracy, have portrayed elites and theories that highlight them as dangerous. Although acrimony between the two camps of theorists has lessened during their protracted debate, there is still a

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24 sizable gap between “neo-elitists” skeptical of democracy and “neo-classical
25 democrats” who view elites as harming democracy.

26 In the classical doctrine of democracy, as Joseph Schumpeter (1942) termed
27 it, democracy meant the sovereignty and direct self-rule by, of, and for the
28 people. When they did not simply ignore political elites, classical doctrines of
29 democracy depicted them as major distortions or shortcomings of democratic
30 rule. Even if political elites have electoral mandates, are relatively representa-
31 tive of a population in their make-ups, and are pluralistic in their structures,
32 they are, at best, awkward compromises or “embarrassing secrets” (Sartori
33 1987, p. 171) and, at worst, “abominations” (Mills 1956, p. 7). Giovanni
34 Sartori has observed that even though “[T]he vital role of leadership is
35 frequently acknowledged...it obtains only a negligible status within the theory
36 of democracy.” At most, democratic theory regards political elites and strong
37 leaders as pathological anomalies or necessary evils (1987, pp. 171–2). To all
38 intents and purposes, democratic theory is incompatible with political elites.
39 It holds that the greater their role is, the less there is of democracy.

40 The classical doctrine’s uncompromising position, which continues to be
41 embraced by some theorists, has co-existed with neo-classical theories of
42 indirect democracy that are somewhat more accommodative of political elites
43 and leaders. In these theories, governing authority is exerted by “deputies” who
44 transmit the preferences of constituents into policies, or authority is exercised
45 by “proxies” charged with articulating the people’s “general will.” Some
46 neo-classical theories anchor popular sovereignty in a widely representative
47 plural or “polyarchal” political leadership whose components check and bal-
48 ance each other and dilute and open the doors for citizen influence. Theories
49 of indirect democracy thus reduce the polarity between the classical doctrine of
50 democracy and classical elite theory. Yet, they confront a dilemma. Either they
51 must accept the intrusions of elites on democracy, or they must minimize,
52 even expunge, these intrusions in order to keep democracy’s normative back-
53 bone intact.

54 Neo-classical democratic theories differ in important ways. The
55 neo-classical label is actually an umbrella for distinct theoretical-normative
56 models, such as participative-deliberative democracy and aggregative-pluralist
57 democracy. Elite theories of democracy have also differed, ranging from
58 Vilfredo Pareto’s uncompromising dismissal of democracy, to Gaetano
59 Mosca’s cautious endorsement of representative democracy, to democratic
60 elitism’s focus on elite-mass linkages, to neo-elitist contentions that configu-
61 rations of elites are the basic determinants of political regimes.

62 I intend to assess the main neo-classical theories of democracy and the main
63 approaches to democracy taken by elite theories. I will first outline two major

neo-classical theories of democracy, namely, participatory-deliberative and aggregative-pluralist theories. I will then compare these theories with two prominent elite theories, namely, demo-elitism and neo-elitism. I will look at how each theory conceptualizes democracy, roles it assigns to political elites and leaders, and roles it assigns to citizens. The normative underpinnings of each theory will also be considered.

Neo-classical Theories of Democracy

Neo-classical theories of democracy assume that citizens have equal moral standing and equal capacities for rational thinking and autonomous action, and that political agents of citizens have sound knowledge of the circumstances in which they act. Democracy is self-rule by equal, rational, and autonomous citizen-sovereigns who decide issues collectively and whose dignity is safeguarded by a rule of law.

Neo-classical theories take two principal forms: participatory-deliberative, and aggregative-pluralist. In the participatory-deliberative form, rule by citizen-sovereigns occurs primarily through public deliberation, while in the aggregative-pluralist form their rule is effected primarily through the aggregation of organized interests and the building of interest coalitions. The participatory-deliberative theory portrays public discourses and forums as the main modes of defining the common good. The aggregative-pluralist theory depicts the individual preferences of citizens as raw materials from which the common good emerges through a process of political articulation and interest aggregation. Interestingly, most renditions of the two theories acknowledge the role of political leadership and powerful, relatively autonomous ruling minorities, yet they seldom discuss this role in an explicit and clear way.

Participatory-Deliberative Democracy

Many advocates of this theory portray public deliberation as the major virtue of the Athenian assembly democracy. They seldom mention, however, that ever since Plato, public deliberation has been criticized as a source of demagoguery, manipulation, and irresponsible rule. In historical reality, the fear of manipulative demagogues and power-hungry tyrants was widespread in ancient Greece, and ostracism was adopted in order to inhibit these pathologies (Elster 1998a, b, pp. 1–2). Rousseau similarly feared egocentric and

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97 irresponsible demagogues who might divert citizens' opinions from the com-
98 mon good. Edmund Burke, J. S. Mill, and Max Weber regarded demagoguery as
99 an integral aspect of democracy, especially of a leader-centered "plebiscitary
100 democracy."

101 A fear of demagogues and recognition of their likelihood can be found in all
102 analyses of democracy made by participatory-deliberative theorists. Leaders
103 and political elites are uniformly viewed as threats to an "authentic" or "ideal"
104 participative-deliberative process, yet they are regarded as probably inescap-
105 able. It is not accidental that John Rawls (1993, pp. 231–9), one of the
106 founding fathers of the participative-deliberative theory of democracy, sees
107 Supreme Courts, rather than elected assemblies, as the ideal place for deliber-
108 ation. Courts, according to Rawls, are more collegial and more insulated from
109 the distorting pressures that come from demagogues and organized interests
110 than are parliaments and open public forums.

111 Theorists in this stream of democratic thought specify rigorous conditions
112 for proper, or at least adequate, public deliberations. They must take place in
113 Rawls's "veil of ignorance," or in Jürgen Habermas's "ideal speech situation,"
114 both of which minimize personal authority, even if it is based on merit, moral
115 virtue, or civic-mindedness. Personal authority of any kind distorts public
116 deliberation, it violates the equality of citizens, and it compromises the
117 rationality and openness of discussion. Participants in discussion must be
118 free from any external obligations or "mandates" that may restrict or divert
119 their contributions. To serve the common good, participants should articulate
120 their autonomous and free opinions and not represent territorial, social,
121 religious, or other segmental interests. They should act as impartial and
122 rational individuals whose purpose it is to find the right opinion, which is
123 an unequivocal answer—the truth—to any public question of importance.
124 Discussion should transcend the prior views of participants and lead to their
125 recognition of the truth. As Elster (1997, pp. 11–12) puts it, in participative-
126 deliberative discussions "[T]here would not be any need for an aggregating
127 mechanism, since a rational discussion would tend to produce unanimous
128 preferences ... Not optimal compromise, but unanimous agreement is the goal
129 of [democratic] politics on this view."

130 As critics point out, however, this is an idealized and idealistic view of an
131 assembly democracy and public deliberations. Moreover, unlike some versions
132 of classical democratic theory, it does not advocate the rule of or by the
133 majority, but only the rule of or by reason. It is a normative model of
134 democracy with weak empirical underpinnings that posits what is desirable,
135 rather than what actually exists. Self-rule of the people is realized, according to
136 participative-deliberative theorists, through inclusive, open, impartial, and

rational public discussions—yet such discussions are recognized as utopian and radically divorced from reality. Demagogy is wished away, as are leadership and elite power that are parts of any real-world decision-making. Paradoxically, however, the strict procedural and substantive requirements of free participative-deliberative decision-making necessitate recognizing the central roles played by convenors, managers, or “guardians” of deliberation, that is, those who assure and safeguard free, autonomous, and disinterested deliberations. This recognition inexorably brings back, albeit through the proverbial “back door,” leaders and elites as facilitators and sponsors of free participation and deliberation.

This, as critics point out, gives participative-deliberative theorizing a paternalistic drift. As Elster (1997, pp. 13–14) notes, the requirement that citizens participate in order to become informed and concerned about policies and take part in discussions of them presupposes persons who will manage, moderate, and regulate discussions to ensure that they are fairly and properly conducted. Such facilitators, who are typically part of an “educated intellectual avant-garde,” can easily impose their own biases, views, and rules on participants. In fact, numerous studies have found that the impact of facilitators of participation, deliberation, and outcomes is frequent and significant.

Critics point to other theoretical and empirical flaws. As Adam Przeworski (1999, p. 145) notes, deliberation in itself presupposes an inequality of influence, even if theorists aim at minimizing it. Moreover, deliberation presupposes unequal information and/or reasoning capacity. Therefore, Habermas’s “free speech condition” appears to be a utopia. In real life, inequality prevails and leaders emerge spontaneously, even in small groups like juries, focus groups, or debating unions. Eloquent or highly motivated speakers become “natural” leaders, and they dominate any deliberation.

Even if public debates closely approximate free deliberations, decisions reached in them are seldom self-executing and self-enacting. Key political philosophers of liberalism, such as Locke, Montesquieu, and the American Federalists, were aware of this fact, and they envisaged an executive branch of government to implement decisions reached collectively. The problem—or rather the deliberative paradox—is that implementation requires leadership to provide decisive, prompt, informed, and clearly directed action. This is another way of saying that the participative-deliberative theory faces the problem of collective action, that is, the inevitable reliance in deliberations and implementations on activists, leaders, and political entrepreneurs. If participative-deliberative groups are to provide public goods, they must be supplemented by implementing agents. The conclusion drawn by elitist critics is that ongoing deliberation as well as decision-making and implementation

177 require leadership, and that leaders routinely have incentives and motivations
178 different from those of average participants and deliberators.

179 **Aggregative-Pluralist Democracy**

180 Some of the conundrums in participative-deliberative theory are tackled by the
181 aggregative-pluralist theory of democracy. Its advocates regard individuals'
182 preferences as the common good's source, and they focus attention on the
183 articulation of this good as well as the responsiveness of a government to
184 citizens' preferences. One should bear in mind that aggregative-pluralist theory
185 is, in fact, a broad family of theoretical interpretations, each offering some
186 specific answers to main theoretical questions. In general, however,
187 aggregative-pluralistic theories are, like Robert Dahl's theory of "polyarchy"
188 (1971), more realistic and more accommodative of elite-centered concerns.

189 While most proponents of aggregative-pluralist democracy view it as indi-
190 rect, as involving, that is, democratically (s)elected representatives, there are
191 some theorists in this school who advocate public referendums (Barber 1984).
192 In a referendum-democracy, citizens express their wills on every important
193 policy-issue directly. Therefore, self-rule by the people is achieved literally.
194 However, direct democracy of this kind is highly vulnerable to criticism.
195 Critics emphasize that the equality of citizens in referendums is almost always
196 compromised by powerful interest groups whose members influence agenda-
197 setting and shape citizens' preferences in referendum campaigns. Every aggre-
198 gation of citizen preferences is problematic, because it contains the imprint of
199 leadership on processes of public articulation and representation.

200 This criticism is pertinent to aggregative-pluralist theorists who focus on
201 "democratic representation" as a necessary means for achieving self-rule by the
202 people. When representation is wide and reinforced by strong mechanisms of
203 accountability, people choose representatives and give them mandating votes
204 to transmit the people's will. Problems remain, however. Critics argue that
205 even if citizens formally give their votes to representative-candidates, demo-
206 cratic procedures must ensure that those elected to government office carry out
207 policies according to the expressed preferences of voters. This leaves room for
208 leaders and elites, who can be seen as merely technical articulators of the
209 popular will (tolerated as a "necessary evil" by direct democrats), but who may
210 play a more consequential role. To illustrate, Anthony Downs (1957) views
211 party leaders as mere technicians, campaign specialists, or spin-doctors whose
212 job it is to match a party's electoral manifesto with the actual policy preferences
213 of those who voted for the party. In Downs's model, leading politicians play

the limited and passive role of deputies who “reflect” public preferences as accurately as possible.

Leaders and political elites are given a more active, but still limited, role in the “mandate” interpretation of democratic representation. According to its advocates, politicians or parties that gain the strongest support from voters at elections acquire an electoral mandate, understood as a broad authorization or normative approval, to carry out a policy or policy agenda that is consonant with their pledges during election campaigns (Mannin et al. 1999). If the public policies accord with the electoral mandate given to office-holders, then the will of the people is realized, and the normative requirement of mandated representation is fulfilled. This portrayal of democratic representation is more realistic than its competitors. It acknowledges the active, although constrained, role of leaders and politicians in selecting and highlighting key issues and soliciting support for specific policy programs. The role of leaders is more obvious and prominent than many aggregative-pluralist theorists are willing to admit.

Some advocates of a pluralist conception of democracy follow the same line of reasoning. In a large and diverse society, these advocates claim, a political majority can be created by a coalition of minorities. However, the coalition-building process usually involves negotiations between leaders of factions, which is another way of saying that it involves top-down elite politics. While they in effect acknowledge elite politics, pluralists tend to be complacent about this, and they focus primarily on the role of citizens.

It is clear that aggregative-pluralist theories of democracy admit—also through the back door—leaders and elites. This poses a number of questions. How does this back-door entry square with the assumption of a universal bottom-up flow of power? How does it square with the portrayal of elections as “voters’ choices” of politicians and preferred policies? Are political leaders passive articulators or active shapers of political issues? Elite theorists answer these questions in a very different—and more consistent—manner.

Neo-elitism and Demo-elitism

Neo-elitists follow the arguments of Vilfredo Pareto and Robert Michels: democracy, understood as rule by the people, is a deceptive illusion. Moreover, the price of sustaining this illusion is high: either the existence of “authentic democracy” is in practice denied and constitutes an empty category, or it is no more than as an ideal type from which all actual regimes depart radically. Democracy is and has always been more apparent than real in nation-states. All

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251 actual political regimes have leaders embedded in small political elites whose
252 interests differ from those of ordinary citizens, and whose interests are not
253 reducible to class, business, or military interests.

254 Neo-elitists do not ignore the concept of democracy, but they give it an
255 altogether different content. They invoke a procedural definition of democracy
256 as their starting point. This conceives of democracy as a competition to lead a
257 state or polity, a conception that reconciles democracy with relatively auton-
258 omous political leaders and largely self-selected elites. It is the foundation of
259 theories about causal relationships between characteristics of leaders and
260 configurations of political elites, such as their degree of integration and
261 unity, and major political outcomes, such as the stability or instability or the
262 democratic or authoritarian character of political regimes (Higley and Burton
263 2006).

264 Demo-elitists hew more closely to the theories of Weber and Schumpeter.
265 They conceive of democracy as compatible with governance by leaders and
266 elites, provided that (1) democrats recognize the power and relative autonomy
267 of political leaders and elites, and (2) leaders and elites, or at least parliamentary
268 segments of them, ally with various categories of citizens. Demo-elitism, in
269 other words, combines Schumpeter's conception of democracy as a *method* of
270 leadership selection with a conception of political representation as a top-down
271 process. In this top-down process, leaders and elite factions adjust their actions
272 in anticipation of citizens' reactions to and evaluations of previous actions by
273 leaders and elites. These adjustments by leaders and elites are not constraints
274 imposed by representation, however. Leaders and elites remain relatively
275 autonomous managers of their alliances with segments of citizens. They
276 manipulate these alliances and alter or end them if existing alliances prove to
277 be counter-productive politically. Periodic elections, in short, simultaneously
278 ensure a competitive political leadership selection and a degree of self-imposed
279 restraint among leaders and elites.

280 Proponents of demo-elitism have little to say about the non-political elite
281 groups that exist in business and financial, judicial and state administrative,
282 media and military as well as other functional sectors of societies. Demo-elitists
283 focus mainly on leaders and elites in the explicitly political sector of a society.
284 Karl Popper (1966, p. 124), who, together with Schumpeter, might be
285 regarded as a forerunner of demo-elitism, defined democracy as a procedure
286 that allows counter-elites to mobilize popular votes to get rid of incumbent
287 rulers peacefully. It facilitates a peaceful circulation of political leaders and
288 elites and facilitates the swift repudiation of failing leaders and factions.
289 Although leaders are more often selected by existing leaders and elite groups
290 than by the mass of citizens, electoral campaigns and competitions nonetheless

strengthen political authority of elected leaders and contribute to the compliance of citizens to decisions and policies. Citizen compliance is “the result of voting, not of discussion, that authorizes governments to govern, to compel” (Przeworski 1999, pp. 43–9).

Demo-elitism, like neo-elitism, places leaders and elites at the center of theoretical attention. Unlike bottom-up accounts of the political process in neo-classical theories of democracy, demo-elitism portrays the process as animated and directed by political leaders. Instead of an autonomous popular will and untrammelled voter preferences canvassed by leaders, policies are proposed by leaders, not by citizens, and they are imposed on publics—with various degrees of success—through persuasion, including demagoguery and image manipulation.

During the quarter century following World War II, demo-elitism was widely discussed in mainstream democratic theory. Demo-elitists were challenged by anti-elites like Peter Bachrach (1967), who saw elites as mortal threats to democracy, and by pluralists, who regarded the power of leaders and elites as safely limited by checks and balances and by veto groups. Reacting to these challenges, demo-elitist theory moved in several directions. The best known were Hannah Pitkin’s (1967) emphasis on elite accountability, John Plamenatz’s (1973) portrayal of elites and leaders as translating public aims and sentiments into electoral appeals, and Eva Etzioni-Halevy’s (1993) analysis of elites as crafting and sustaining alliances with voters by adjusting their policies and appeals for support.

These accounts departed substantially from the core of elite theory and were familiar to theorists of parliamentarism. Pitkin, Plamenatz, and Etzioni-Halevy revitalized the concept of accountable and responsible leadership originally outlined by Edmund Burke and J. S. Mill in discussions of liberal representation and parliamentary systems. Like most demo-elitists, Burke and Mill assumed that citizens are little interested in detailed political questions, and relatively few have clear policy preferences. However, voters do respond to appeals by leaders and elites, they ally themselves with particular leaders, they develop post hoc judgments of governments, and they employ these judgments to hold rulers to account.

Other demo-elitists elaborated Weber’s theory of “leader democracy.” In it, citizens-voters do not play an active role in the decision-making process; they merely respond to successful leadership appeals. Leaders shape the interpretations of political situations as well as the proposed courses of action. They do not act on behalf of voters they claim to represent, but by their own volition. Theorists of leader democracy also point to the impact of the mass media in

330 personalizing politics and making leaders the central players in politics
331 (Pakulski and Körösényi 2012).

332 A rather eccentric member of the expanding demo-elitist family is Jeffrey
333 Green (2010), who outlines an “ocular-plebiscitary” model of democracy that
334 bears some resemblance to Weber’s volatile “plebiscitary democracy” and to
335 the media-conscious “leader democracy.” In Green’s view, contemporary
336 political leaders rely increasingly on their visual image presentations and
337 image management, and voters rely increasingly on these presentations and
338 images when allocating their support. Voters are empowered by “gazing” at
339 leaders’ behavior in electronic media, and by applying a “principle of candor”
340 when allocating their votes. This image-based presentation becomes “a neces-
341 sary condition of any attempt by a leader to generate charismatic authority”
342 (Green 2010, p. 130).

343 Conclusions

344 There are two main trends in contemporary elite and democratic theory.
345 One is a trend toward a theoretical rapprochement by joining elite rule
346 and representative democracy. In this trend, theorists portray elites as increas-
347 ingly sensitive to electoral constituencies, and they see democracy in a
348 Schumpeterian way, which is free from unrealistic expectations about power
349 being directly exercised by the people. This realistic view of democracy, in
350 which political leaders regularly compete for electoral mandates, amounts to a
351 theoretical convergence between classical elitism and a neo-classical theory of
352 democracy. The progress of this convergence brings advocates of formerly
353 opposing positions closer to each other, but it blunts the notion of elite rule,
354 because elites are depicted as less autonomous and increasingly constrained by
355 electoral pressures exerted by voters. Nevertheless, this blunting does not deny
356 the oligarchic character of contemporary democracies.

357 A second trend is exemplified by neo-elitists. They re-affirm the classical
358 elitist skepticism about popular sovereignty, direct popular participation, and
359 unfettered political representation. Democracy, understood as rule of the
360 people’s rule, is dismissed on grounds that it is an attractive but deceptive
361 ideological formula. Neo-elitists urge a hyper-realistic understanding of orga-
362 nized power structures in which leaders and elites are the key actors. Leaders
363 and political elites differ widely in their configurations, competence, and
364 effectiveness, but their centrality shapes the scope of any viable political
365 undertaking.

This sober, even somber view had relatively few adherents during the quarter century of burgeoning prosperity, social stability, and safety from international threats that followed World War II in West European and English-speaking countries. Since the onset of the Great Recession and a spreading perception of political decay, the neo-elitist view has revived. Neo-elitists echo a widespread feeling that democracy has always been more apparent than real, and that the existence and domination of ruling minorities, some of them more and some less competent in exercising power, limit reformist aspirations and what is possible politically.

The classical elite theorists instigated two important debates. The first concerned the feasibility of democracy in the face of demagogic populism and utopian radicalism manifested, respectively, by fascism and revolutionary socialism. They provided a comprehensive debunking of democratic illusions and of Enlightenment beliefs of open-ended progress, ever-increasing equality, and the triumph of reason. The second debate that stemmed from the classical elite theorists has been about the historical forms and roles of political elites. They insisted that, contrary to the diagnoses and predictions of radical socialists and democrats alike, political elites are inescapable even though they change constantly in abilities and forms.

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