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Political Elites and Democracy: A Critical Overview

Abstract

This article critically examines elitist and democratic elitist theories through a review of classical and modern theorists. It explores the role of elites in modern society within the context of democratic governance and democratization. Classical theorists are criticized for reflecting the political dynamics of their time, which are often used to justify authoritarianism. Post-World War II scholarship, however, began linking pluralism with democracy, suggesting that elite rule could be compatible with democratic systems-particularly in advanced capitalist societies. Still, critics like Mills argue that formal democracy may conceal deep inequalities, reinforcing elite dominance. While most theorists agree on the inevitability of elite rule in modern societies, they differ on its compatibility with democracy, indicating that other regime and system features should also be taken into account. Those with a rigid view of democracy see elite rule as inherently undemocratic. Democratic elitists, by contrast, emphasize the importance of broader factors-such as class, economic development, political institutions, civil society, and media-in determining whether elite rule supports or undermines democracy.

Keywords: Democracy, Elite Theory, Elitism, Democratic Elitism, Political Elite.

Siyasal Seçkinler ve Demokrasi: Eleştirel bir İnceleme

Öz

Bu makalede, klasik ve modern kuramcıların çalışmalarının eleştirel incelemesiyle, seçkinçi ve demokratik seçkinçi kuramları incelenmiştir. Modern toplumlarda seçkinlerin konumu, temelde demokrasi ve demokratikleşme açısından değerlendirilmiştir. Geç-klasik dönemdeki siyaset sosyologları seçkinciliği, dönemin de etkisiyle yönetimlerin otoriter eğilimlerini meşrulaştırmaya hizmet eden şekilde kullanmıştır. Ancak özellikle 2. Dünya Savaşı'nın ardından gelişmiş ülkelerin tam sanayileşmesi ve demokratik toplum modelini benimsemesiyle, seçkinciliğin demokrasi ile gelişmeyeceği, çoğulcu model temelinde demokrasının istikrarına hizmet edebileceği yönünde çalışmalar doğalmıştır. Ancak yine bu dönemde, Mills gibi bazı sosyologlar, formel demokrasının toplum içerisindeki güç ilişkilerini gizlemeye ve derinleştirmeye hizmet edebildiğini ve seçkin-kitle ayrimi üzerinden şekillendirdiğini iddia etmiştir. İncelenen çalışmaların çoğu ortak bir nokta seçkinlerin özellikle modern sanayi toplumlarda kaçınılmazlığıken, temel ayrim noktası bu durumun demokrasiye uyumlu olup olmadığıdır. Demokrasının daha mutlak tanımına bağlı araştırmacılar, seçkin yönetiminin demokrasi açısından olumsuzluklarına vurgu yaparken, gerçekçi demokratik seçkinçiler, bu durumun farklı pek çok değişkene bağlı olduğunu belirtmektedir. Sınıf, gelişmişlik düzeyi, siyasi gelenekler, sivil toplum ve medya, kurumsal düzenlemelerin, kaçınılmaz görülen seçkin yönetiminin bir tür oligarşije dönüşmemesi için gerekliliği vurgulanmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Demokrasi, Seçkinler Kuramı, Seçkincilik, Demokratik Seçkincilik, Siyaset Seçkinler.

1. Introduction

This article is an overview and discussion of theories regarding the role of political elites in modern democracies and democratization. My purpose here is to demonstrate first, the inevitability of the elites for political systems and what this implies for democracy. Secondly, I am emphasizing that elite rule has different meanings in different political systems. How political elite form and transform based on both written and unwritten rules, is a useful approach. In other words, conditions of entry into political elite positions and status as well as the major dynamics of elite circulation and reproduction help us define how a political system can be categorized for analytical and comparative purposes.

Below I am starting with a general overview of the debate on political elite as a question in modern politics. In the third section I am making a critical discussion of classical theories of elite theories. The fourth section focuses on democratic elitism, i.e., how the inevitability of political elites may be compatible with modern societies. The conclusion section summarizes the strengths and limits of elite theories.

2. Problematizing the Role of Political Elite in Democratization

Debates on political regime types and elite rule existed prior to modern era, political and industrial modernization set the framework for more complex discussions on such topics. The emergence of the idea of modern democracy based on people's will, nation-state and different forms of modern government necessitated new challenges and explanations regarding the role of political elite. In this sense, I see two important phenomena as the primary context behind which the elite theories emerged: increased bureaucratization in governance and the idea of liberal democracy.

Modern era politics is characterized by two contradicting but complementary processes. On the one hand, the governance of human societies has become a field of activity defined and guided by rationality and science. Bureaucratization, probably the most important consequence of rationalization of governance of state had a number of implications for politics. First of all, the capabilities of governments increased in an unprecedented scale thanks to modern bureaucracy. With the rationalization of government, states were able to penetrate areas of political, economic and social life in extents that were unimaginable by previous political systems. Secondly, state institutions at all levels now required a rather large group of cadres, in addition to the politicians themselves. Bureaucrats and technocrats were appointed to their respective positions due to their education and expertise while inherited status was ideally excluded as a criterion. Such positions of power and authority were temporary and impersonal. Thirdly, as the state capacity increased, policy or decision making was also a matter of rationality and science. A massive apparatus of bureaucrats and technocrats, working closely with the elected politicians, inevitably obtained a status in policy making and implementation without being directly accountable to the general public.

The defining feature of modern political systems was the establishment of popular will and democracy as their foundational framework. In Western Europe and beyond, modern democracy became closely linked to the integration of the general population into political processes through universal citizenship and suffrage. The extension of voting rights to the broader populace was not solely grounded in the egalitarian and libertarian ideals of

democracy rooted in Enlightenment philosophy. It also aimed to foster a government capable of creating a better society. This goal was pursued by establishing a broad electoral base, enabling various elite groups to compete for public support during elections. By incorporating previously excluded groups into political participation, this approach sought to prevent the emergence of entrenched elite leaderships, such as aristocracies.

Democracy, understood as governance by the people for the people, was a central promise of bourgeois revolutions, initially in Western Europe and subsequently across other regions of the world. Consequently, popular elections became the primary mechanism for selecting societal rulers. Despite incorporating scientific and rational principles and expanding political participation to the masses, this new political framework was not immune to criticism. In the industrialized world of the nineteenth century, the liberal democratic ideal dominated the political agenda but was interpreted in diverse ways across the ideological spectrum.

The first thorough critique of liberal democracy, viewed as a political system operating within and subordinate to the capitalist economic structure, was articulated by Karl Marx. He contended that only a proletarian revolution could realize the democratic ideal, as liberal democracy, in his analysis, served as a façade through which the bourgeoisie legitimized its exploitation of the masses (Marx 2016; 2020). Importantly, Marxist theory preserved the democratic ideal while subordinating politics to economic structures. According to Marx, state power was not an ultimate objective but rather a tool enabling the bourgeoisie to perpetuate the capitalist system for increased exploitation and profit. In essence, the bourgeoisie's political dominance was underpinned by their control of the economic system.

Another significant critique of modern political formations can be found in Max Weber's studies of industrial societies, which offered alternative perspectives on the complexities of these systems. The elevated role of bureaucrats and technocrats in policymaking has often been justified by appeals to the principles of scientific and rational governance. However, Max Weber identifies a tension within bureaucratic systems that contradicts democratic ideals. In questioning the deterministic role of economy and ownership, Weber argues that bureaucracy, despite lacking direct control over the means of production or decision-making authority at the highest levels, tends to evolve into an independent power structure (Weber 1978; 2004). As part of his analysis of the modern state's organization, Weber highlights the bureaucratic inclination toward accumulating power, describing this dynamic as inherent to bureaucratic systems. He famously notes, "Rational calculation... reduces every worker to a cog in this bureaucratic machine and, seeing himself in this light, he will merely ask how to transform himself... to a bigger cog... The passion for bureaucratization at this meeting drives us to despair" (Weber 1978: xx).

Weber's concern lies in the observation that bureaucratic systems naturally drive their members to abandon neutral, scientific, and rational principles in favor of personal career advancement. This critique allows for a comparison between Weber and Karl Marx, who, despite their differing methodologies and conclusions, share two significant intellectual frameworks. First, both theorists emphasize the relationship between economy and politics. For Marx, politics is largely shaped by the class character of the state, with individuals' political views reflecting the underlying economic structure. Conversely, Weber opposes this causality by arguing that politics has its internal dynamics and the motivation for power comes from the simple fact that it provides individuals with means to achieve their goals. Second, both Marx

and Weber derive normative conclusions from their empirical studies of political and economic systems in industrial societies. These normative evaluations are grounded in a shared recognition of democracy as an ideal against which the realities of political systems can be assessed. For Marx, liberal democracy functions as a mechanism through which the ruling class obscures its domination over the means of production. In contrast, Weber warns of the risks associated with politics becoming a profession and the potential for bureaucracy to evolve into an unaccountable, autonomous power. These critiques provide the intellectual context within which the elite theorists' challenges to democracy can be situated.

The early analyses of elite theorists were shaped by two central critiques. The first targeted Karl Marx's elevation of the masses, particularly the working class, as central actors in politics. The second, and arguably more significant critique, was directed at the democratic ideal itself, which liberal democratic regimes employed to legitimize their authority. For elite theorists, both Marx's vision of a political system governed by ordinary individuals and the liberal democratic model of electing leaders through popular vote were fundamentally flawed (Pareto 1935, Mosca 1939, Michels 1962). They argued that democracy, as an ideal, was unattainable. While elite theorists agreed with Marx's assertion that liberal democracy masked the rule of a small minority, they diverged in their response. Rather than seeking to change this reality, they accepted it as an immutable aspect of political systems. To counter Marxist perspectives, early elite theorists adopted a methodological approach that focused on what they considered a universal feature of political systems: the inevitability of elite dominance. Although this approach was criticized for its ahistorical and potentially flawed methodology, as well as for its tendency to reach normative conclusions about the role of politics in society, it succeeded in establishing politics as an independent field of study.

This foundational assumption—that politics operates independently of the economic system—provided a theoretical framework for future scholars advocating the autonomy of politics. In this context, classical elite theories laid the groundwork for subsequent studies on political elites. Before delving into more contemporary theories on this topic, it is necessary to briefly outline the key principles of classical elite theory.

3. The Inevitability of the Elite: Classical Elite Theories

Vilfredo Pareto was the first to approach the scientific study of politics by broadly defining society as comprising two contrasting groups: the rulers and the ruled. The term "elite," although widely used by Pareto, originated in the seventeenth century, where it described objects of superior quality. By the late nineteenth century, its application expanded to denote upper social strata, including prestigious military units and high-ranking nobility (Bottomore, 1964:1). The Oxford English Dictionary documented the term in 1823, and it gained prominence in European social and political studies during the late 1800s, reaching Britain and America by the 1930s. Pareto's conceptualization of the elite was embedded within his general sociological theories, which explained social actions through innate psychological traits. These traits, according to Pareto, were immutable aspects of human nature that shaped all activities, including politics. He argued that human societies were governed by universal principles derived not from social relations but from unchanging psychological characteristics.

Pareto contended that every society consisted of two broad categories: the elite and the non-elite. This distinction was grounded in a straightforward premise—individuals could be

evaluated based on their proficiency in specific roles or activities, with a subset excelling significantly (Pareto, 1935). Hence, elites exist across various domains of activity. Notably, Pareto emphasized a neutral interpretation of the elite, devoid of moral judgment. For instance, elites could encompass both exceptional lawyers and masterful criminals. This dichotomy extended to politics, where governance was managed by a talented minority distinct from the less skilled majority. Pareto posited that leadership abilities followed a natural distribution, consistent with mathematical principles. Initially described as two naturally occurring groups with an unclear relationship, Pareto, influenced by Mosca, later defined rulers and the ruled as opposing classes (Bottomore, 1990:3), though the distinction remained rooted in psychology.

Human actions, Pareto asserted, could not be entirely rationalized. He identified two categories of influences shaping behavior: derivatives and residues. Derivatives represent frameworks for justifying actions, akin to Marx's ideology, encompassing mutable beliefs and theories about politics and societal subsystems (Vergin, 2003:112). Despite their apparent reliance on logic, derivatives were inherently non-logical. Residues, in contrast, are constant psychological attributes that explain non-logical behaviors. Among residues, two primary types emerge—those fostering creativity and innovation and those ensuring stability and order. While most individuals exhibit the latter, rulers typically embody the former. This distinction also clarifies divergent styles of governance, providing a foundation for comparative political studies. Politicians with creative residues employ innovative methods to gain and maintain power, while others emphasize stability. For Pareto, effective rulers required a balance of these skills, a view reminiscent of Machiavelli's ideal leader (Parry, 1969/2005:47). In practice, however, elites often lacked this balance, leading to a cyclical replacement between two archetypes of rulers: "foxes" (creative leaders) and "lions" (stability-oriented leaders). Pareto encapsulated this phenomenon in his observation that "history is a graveyard of aristocracies." Additionally, elite groups that failed to incorporate new talent disrupted social equilibrium, precipitating revolutionary changes.

Subsequent studies of political systems underscored the inevitability of elites in governance, advancing the study of politics as an independent discipline. Robert Michels, a protégé of Max Weber, provided significant insights into elite dynamics. Echoing Mosca's emphasis on organization as the basis of elite power, Michels (1962) proposed that organizational structures inherently produced elites. His "iron law of oligarchy" posited that leadership was indispensable for organizational survival, regardless of the organization's democratic ideals. Michels illustrated his theory by examining the German Social Democratic Party, showing that even a party committed to egalitarianism adhered to oligarchic principles. Leadership positions, requiring specialized knowledge and skills, created a hierarchy that undermined accountability. Michels observed that leaders prioritized maintaining their authority over ideological principles, mirroring Weber's insights on bureaucracies. This dynamic was evident in electoral politics, where party elites solidified their power, making them indispensable yet increasingly detached from the party's broader membership.

Michels' work extended beyond political parties, asserting that oligarchic tendencies were universal in all organizations. The dilemma of modern societies, he argued, lay in the incompatibility between the need for organization and the impossibility of achieving genuine democratic participation. However, Michels suggested that pluralism within elite groups could mitigate authoritarianism, enabling relatively democratic governance. This perspective aligned

with Mosca's pluralist theories, which emphasized the collective nature of elite power and the necessity of elite renewal through recruitment of talent from lower strata. Mosca's distinction between rulers and ruled as "classes" highlighted the dynamic and socially constructed nature of these divisions. He emphasized that the power of the ruling class stemmed from their minority status and organizational cohesion, which allowed them to dominate the disorganized majority. Mosca also noted that continual recruitment of talented individuals from the lower classes was vital to prevent elite decay. His classification of political systems based on recruitment and authority flow provided a framework for comparative politics, laying the groundwork for democratic elitism.

C. Wright Mills expanded upon these foundations by situating elite power within institutional contexts. Unlike earlier theorists who attributed elite dominance to psychological traits or economic control, Mills (1956) argued that elite power arose from broader institutional structures. His concept of the "power elite" described a cohesive group comprising leaders from the political, military, and corporate sectors, united by shared interests and mutual reinforcement. This interdependence facilitated their dominance over key decision-making processes, perpetuating their privileged status. Mills highlighted recruitment practices as a mechanism for sustaining the power elite, emphasizing the limited access to top positions, which were predominantly reserved for members of wealthy classes. While Mills critiqued the concentrated power of elites, he did not advocate for its abolition. Instead, he proposed that elites could contribute positively by being held accountable to intellectual oversight.

In summary, early elite theorists such as Pareto, Michels, and Mosca laid the groundwork for understanding the inevitability of elites in political systems. Although their theories often emphasized the impossibility of democracy and relied on psychological and organizational explanations, later scholars like Mills introduced structural perspectives, linking elite power to institutional dynamics. This evolution in elite theory has provided a nuanced understanding of power, governance, and the interplay between elite and non-elite groups in society.

4. Democratic Elitism: For the People, by the Elite

The development and evolution of elite theories are deeply intertwined with the emergence of modern industrial societies. The emphasis on the division of labor, meritocracy, and the increasing demand for skilled professionals was not confined to economic spheres but extended to politics, conceptualized as a mediating mechanism for societal prosperity and well-being. However, the rise of delegative democracy in modern societies has been critiqued for its potential undemocratic implications. One perspective argues that "the democratic revolutions of the eighteenth century were obsolete before they had been consummated" (Wolin, 1967: viii, in Bachrach, 1967). This viewpoint highlights an inherent contradiction between the indispensable role of experts in sustaining advanced industrial societies and the democratic ideal. The revolutionary ideals were limited within the social-historical framework. In other words, the principle of rule by the people was reduced to limited popular participation in politics. The dilemma was between maximalist and minimalist definitions of democracy.

Elite theories often rest on the premise that, akin to economics or bureaucracy, politics requires individuals with specialized knowledge and expertise in governance and administration. Early elitists contended that entrusting leadership selection to the general electorate through universal suffrage was unrealistic. In highly stratified and differentiated societies, the majority

population was perceived as lacking the requisite knowledge and expertise to navigate complex policy domains. Consequently, elitists viewed the inclusion of the broader electorate in leadership selection as fundamentally contradictory. Early elite theorists, some of implicit proponents of more authoritarian systems, dismissed democratic rule as inefficient but raised a pivotal question: is true democracy viable in modern, industrial societies?

Another crucial historical development influencing elitist theories was the emergence of mass political movements. The modern era, epitomized by the French Revolution, was enabled by the political mobilization of masses previously excluded from leadership and policymaking processes. This mobilization was driven by the promise of modern democracy. Concurrently, industrialization transformed rural populations into a working class whose political demands reflected their socio-economic marginalization. While early elite theories expressed suspicion towards 19th-century revolutionary movements and socialism, the emergence of authoritarian regimes in the 20th century, such as fascism in Italy and Germany and communism in the Soviet Union, initiated new debates about elites, masses, classes, and democracy.

While elite theorists advocated for limited public participation in politics, liberal democrats argued that democracy's shortcomings stemmed from the elite's irresponsible actions (Bachrach, 1967: 28–29). Elite theorists redefined democracy by contending that the real threat came from the majority, characterized as susceptible to authoritarian ideologies and lacking moral and intellectual standards. They proposed a framework to preserve democracy by limiting popular influence on politics. Democratic elitists derived theoretical and empirical support for their view that elites, rather than the masses, safeguard democracy from mass society theories, the managerial revolution, and studies of lower-class electoral behavior. For instance, Lipset (1959) argued that the masses' inclination toward authoritarianism contributed to totalitarian regimes, implying the necessity of elites for democratic stability. This perspective reversed the classical view of the elite-mass relationship, portraying the elite as democracy's chief guardian against the perceived risks posed by the masses (Bachrach, 1967: 32).

This shift in focus, influenced by the experience of authoritarian regimes, redirected the theoretical emphasis from expanding democratic boundaries to stabilizing existing systems or achieving "political equilibrium" (Bachrach, 1967: 32). Consequently, a relatively passive populace was considered essential for stable democracies, contradicting the notion that widespread participation is indicative of democratic health. Key questions arising from democratic elitism involve distinctions between elites and masses, the basis and nature of power, the meanings of equality and accountability in democracies, and the role of elites in sustaining democracy. These issues, foundational to democratic elitist thought, are discussed with reference to classical theories.

The compatibility of elitism and democracy was notably articulated by Schumpeter (1942/1976), who argued for a pragmatic retreat from normative definitions of democracy. He proposed that democracy is not a societal ideal or a moral end but a procedural method for selecting leaders and organizing governance. Echoing Weber and Mosca, Schumpeter asserted that political decision-making is unsuitable for broad public participation and is instead the purview of elected elites. He defined democracy as a mechanism for competition among political contenders, where voters delegate their authority to leaders, retaining the power to replace them through subsequent elections if dissatisfied. Schumpeter's approach likened democratic politics to a liberal market, where voters, like consumers, evaluate and choose

among competing offerings. This competitive structure not only underpins economic systems but also reinforces democratic governance. In this framework, elite autonomy is crucial for responsible leadership. Schumpeter (2003: 295) emphasized the division of labor between voters and politicians, suggesting that the electorate should defer to the expertise of elected leaders.

Schumpeter further argued that the counterbalance to elite power lies in inter-elite competition and the role of independent agencies. Political systems, he maintained, operate as vocations, with elites competing for influence. Non-state elites, such as leaders in non-governmental institutions, also play a vital role in maintaining a pluralistic and competitive political system, ensuring checks on state elites and safeguarding democratic integrity. Through these arguments, democratic elitism reframes democracy as a system wherein elite autonomy and competition are fundamental to its sustainability, challenging classical democratic ideals that emphasize broad public participation.

Schumpeter's examination of elite circulation offers a significant contribution by integrating both individual and societal factors. He asserts that upward mobility is shaped not solely by personal attributes but also by the openness of upper-class structures and the emergence of new societal roles. Similar to Mosca, Schumpeter refutes the notion that elite circulation arises from internal decay, emphasizing instead the impact of external social dynamics. Economic and cultural changes can lead to the rise of new social groups or the decline of established ones. According to Schumpeter, a group's societal position is determined by the significance of its function and the efficacy with which it fulfills that function. Should a group's relevance diminish or its performance deteriorate, it will inevitably be supplanted by others.

Building on classical elite theories, Aron (1950) underscores the autonomy of politics from societal structures, presenting an antithetical view to Marxist interpretations. Aron posits that the organization and operation of elites fundamentally shape political regimes, asserting that the elite structure influences society more profoundly than it reflects societal composition (Etzioni-Halevy, 1993, p. 61). While Aron acknowledges the inevitability of inequality, he argues that this does not necessitate authoritarianism. Instead, he emphasizes that Western democracies maintain political sustainability through relatively open opportunities for elite circulation. Aron highlights the role of elite plurality in safeguarding liberty, noting that modern society's complexity diffuses power across multiple spheres, thus preventing any single elite group from monopolizing authority.

However, Aron cautions that the mere presence of diverse elite groups does not guarantee societal freedom (1957; 1968). Drawing on his analysis of Western European democracies, he illustrates how historically evolved checks and balances constrain elite power. Aron argues that the key distinction between democratic and authoritarian systems lies in the latter's centralization of power within a homogenous elite group, as exemplified by the Soviet Union. In contrast, democratic systems allow for competition and compromise among diverse elite groups. He identifies the principles of elite recruitment and cohesion as critical factors distinguishing democratic systems from totalitarian ones. While both the Soviet Union and the United States exhibit elite plurality, the former's elite operates under the ideological monopoly of the Communist Party, whereas the latter fosters pluralism through inter-elite collaboration.

Aron further emphasizes that sustainable democracies require an intermediate level of inter-elite consensus. Excessive elite unity can undermine freedom, while extreme disunity can destabilize the state. He argues that Western democracies thrive due to an inter-elite consensus on fundamental issues, enabling legitimate competition among elite groups while maintaining societal stability. This consensus ensures a clear distinction between the state and society, preventing any elite group from amassing unchecked power. Aron identifies three critical features of liberal democracies: (1) the capacity of governmental authority to resolve inter-elite conflicts for the common good, (2) economic policies that facilitate social mobility, and (3) mechanisms to limit demands for radical regime change (Bottomore, 1964, p. 113).

In examining the future of communist and democratic systems, Aron (1957; 1967) and Galbraith (1985; 1973) propose a convergence theory, suggesting that technological and economic development will drive similarities between these political systems. Although convergence theory predicts greater alignment between communist and democratic societies, Aron's analysis reveals the enduring importance of political distinctions, particularly regarding elite autonomy. The collapse of the Soviet Union has been interpreted as an affirmation of convergence theories, reflecting increased resemblance between political systems (Vergin, 2003, pp. 128–129).

Dahl (1961; 1971), while not a traditional elitist, provides a pluralist perspective on elite structures within Western democracies. He contrasts modernized societies, characterized by a diverse elite structure, with less developed societies, where power is concentrated within a unified elite composed of traditional groups such as landowners, the military, and the clergy. Dahl's pluralist model depicts society as an assembly of smaller, competing interest groups, rejecting C. Wright Mills's assertion of a cohesive ruling elite in the United States. Dahl argues that democratic survival depends on preventing any single power group from dominating the political landscape. Elite competition and coalition-building are essential for achieving political office and sustaining democracy.

Dahl also introduces the concept of "political resources," defined as assets enabling individuals or groups to influence political behavior, such as money, information, or force (Dahl, 1971, pp. 82–83). Although political resources are unevenly distributed, Dahl contends that this does not result in a unified ruling class. Instead, pluralist democracy acknowledges inequality and diversity as inherent features of society. While Dahl recognizes barriers to political participation, such as disparities in wealth, education, and status, he believes these obstacles can be mitigated within democratic systems to achieve greater equality.

Sartori (1997) advances a contemporary defense of elitist democracy, arguing that democracy's sustainability depends on the leadership of recognized elites. For Sartori, the greatest threat to democracy is not elite dominance but mediocrity. He reduces democracy to its procedural minimum—elections—viewing them as a mechanism for selecting leaders of the highest quality. Sartori emphasizes the importance of pluralism, which he defines as the diversification of power among independent and non-exclusive groups. He asserts that dissent, rather than conflict or consensus, underpins liberal democracy by fostering diversity and plurality (Sartori, 1997, p. 62).

Sartori also differentiates between the democratization process and established democracies. While increased popular participation may be necessary during transitions from autocratic

regimes, Sartori argues that established democracies must limit such participation to prevent the excesses of democracy, such as demagoguery and perfectionism. Ultimately, Sartori's theory highlights the indispensable role of elite leadership and pluralism in maintaining the balance and legitimacy of democratic systems.

5. Conclusion

Drawing from classical works in elite theory, several key conclusions can be derived. First, politics in modern societies remains a domain predominantly led by elites. However, the concept of "elite" has evolved from being strictly an ascribed status to one that encompasses various forms of merit and achievement. While modern political systems are founded on different manifestations of popular will and democratic governance, the complexity of administering contemporary societies necessitates the presence of a political elite. To effectively make and implement decisions, political elites require a degree of autonomy from the electorate, or the masses, which introduces an inherently anti-democratic dimension to democratic governance.

This observation leads to the second conclusion: unchecked political elites have the potential to evolve into anti-democratic forces. In the absence of robust civil society structures, including active popular associations, a free press, international institutions, and competing centers of power, political elites may consolidate authority, paving the way for authoritarian rule. The same independence that allows elites to exercise their expertise in governance can simultaneously pose a threat to democratic principles, as politics fundamentally involves the accumulation, direction, and exercise of power.

The third conclusion addresses the prerequisites for sustainable democratic governance. While political elites are indispensable for managing the complexities of modern states, their role must be balanced by mechanisms that ensure accountability to the broader population. A vibrant civil society and independent media are essential for maintaining this balance. However, the most critical element is the existence of viable alternatives to those in power. A competitive political landscape, marked by opposing parties and candidates, ensures that diverse viewpoints and interests are represented in decision-making processes. This competition helps safeguard against governance that serves only narrow or exclusive segments of society. In liberal democracies, a plurality of elites committed to the principles of regular and transparent elections forms the foundational standard for sustaining democratic systems.

Finally, a fourth inference underscores the importance of regular government transitions through free and fair elections. Sustainable democracies rely on some degree of political circulation, where elite positions are not monopolized by hereditary privilege or wealth. Entry into political leadership must be based on merit rather than ascribed status, and holding power should not serve as a means for personal enrichment or the abuse of authority. The continuous renewal of political factions and leadership, combined with adherence to democratic norms, is indispensable for preserving the integrity and legitimacy of democratic governance.

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