

Elites in representative democracy



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Living Political Ideas – ‘ Representative democracies will always need elites,’ Discuss.

A Representative democracy is a form of government which is based on the principles of representatives who have been selected by the people; it can be argued that representative democracies will always need elites. This essay will firstly examine the notion of Representative Democracies in order to gain an understanding of its key components using the political ideas of both Edmund Burke and James Madison who were both in favour of Representative democracy. Elitism is a theory which emphasises the importance of a small elite group amongst society, links between Elitism theory and democracy will be analysed using the ideas of various Elite theorists. It can be argued that even though representative democracies aim to take into account the opinions and views of the majority this isn't necessary the case since only a minority of society choose to participate in the political process. To conclude this essay, theories of populism will be discussed and also the argument that globalisation has aided in creating a greater number of elites in representative democracies.

Representative Democracies are ones in which citizens within a country elect representatives to make decisions for them. Elections must be free and fair and the political party which receives the majority of votes forms the government ^[1]. The political theorist Edmund Burke supported the notion of representative democracy but saw the title ' representative' as depending on how much members of the public were able to rely on their representatives ^[2]. According to Burke, *“ your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he*

sacrifices it to your opinion” ^[3] . As with Burke, James Madison gave support towards the rationales of representative democracy. According to Madison public views and opinions can be refined and enlarged when passed through a body of elected citizens. Madison also argued that Representative government forces elections themselves to provide a clarification of public issues, and those able to withstand the election process are likely to be able to represent the true interests of all citizens ^[4] .

Elite theorists argue that individuals who are considered objectively superior to others should hold more superior positions within society ^[5] . Elitists believe that society comprises of three different types of people; firstly there is a supreme all-seeing leader who possesses unrivalled authority and secondly, there is ‘warrior’ elite who is distinguished by its capacity for self-sacrifice. Finally, there are the masses that are weak and ignorant, their destiny is simply obedience ^[6] .

According to Elitist theorist Mosca, modern elites have superior organisational skills which were necessary in gaining political power; he also asserted that all forms of social organization would be impossible without a ruling class ^[7] . Mosca states that:

“ Those who hold and exercise State Power are always a minority, and that below them lies a numerous class of people who never participate in real terms in government are subject to the will of the former; we may call them the ruled” ^[8] .

Elite theorist Michel's goes even further by suggesting the inevitability of elite rule as the "iron law of oligarchy". According to this democracy is paradoxical and therefore impossible since democracy cannot exist without organisation and organisation requires elites. The 'Iron Law of Oligarchy', asserts that real democracy is unable to exist without becoming an oligarchy, an oligarchy is a form of government in which all power is vested in a few dominant individuals ^[9]. The two key classical elite theorists Mosca and Pareto differ in their view of which resources elites utilise, but both agree that the state and the civil society are characterised by an inevitable division of power between elites and the masses. Mosca sees elites to possess various organisational skills; elite theorist Pareto is more militant concerning the physical and mental strength which determine their suitability for government ^[10].

It can be argued that in any Representative Democracy, elites will still be present. The United Kingdom is a Representative Democracy this is because all citizens over the age of 18 are able to vote and the political party which receives the most amounts of votes is elected ^[11]. Regardless of this though the United Kingdom has extremely low levels of turnout and research has shown that it's often those with higher levels of education and income are more likely to turnout than their less affluent counterparts. This therefore demonstrates the ideas put forward by Elite theorist since in a Representative Democracy only a small number of the electorate are having their opinions accounted for and those that are participating are likely to be considered members of an affluent elite within society.

According to Manin, Elites do still play a role in Representative Democracy. This is because people are selected based upon uncommon characteristics which are valued by voters. Voters select these distinctive qualities that they would like to see in their representatives. These qualities vary from a variety of things for example their uncommon ability to articulate and promote a particular political opinion ^[12]. Therefore the notion of elites is still evident since these people possess a particular talent or characteristic that most people sharing that opinion do not also possess. Manin also states that even though individuals may recognise the importance of elites they do not necessarily support the theory of Elitism ^[13]

Opposed to Elitism is the theory of Populism; populism emphasis's the belief that the instincts and wishes of the majority provide the principal legitimate guide to political action. Movements or parties described as populist have been characterized by their claim to support the common people in the face of corrupt economic or political elites ^[14]. Populism is a democratic system whereby politicians make a direct appeal to the people and will claim to give expression to their deepest hopes and fears and all intermediate institutions are often distrusted ^[15]. This therefore demonstrating alternative approaches which believe the opinions of the people should be considered before taking any form of political action.

It can be argued that within the era of globalisation new elites have become one of the consequences of representative democracy. Globalization has seen the increasing ability of corporations to expand across borders. Globalization is a process which has been engineered by corporate elites;

governments have helped this process by taking incremental policy action which was implemented in secret without national debate and discussion. For example, In Europe, polls have shown a persistent majority opposed to the introduction of the Euro, but since powerful elite supports it the plans move forward ^[16] . According to Herman,

“ Globalization has also steadily weakened democracy, partly as a result of unplanned effects, but also because the containment of labour costs and scaling down of the welfare state has required the business minority to establish firm control of the state and remove its capacity to respond to the demands of the majority.” ^[17] .

To conclude, even though the principle aim of Representative Democracy is to ensure the views of the majority are been accounted for it can be argued that Elites are still prevalent. A Representative Democracy is one which is based upon the views and principles of representatives elected by citizens. Elite theorists argue that there is a group of individuals in society whose ideas and preferences are more superior to others, they see democracy as a temporary phenomenon which will morph into an oligarchy since it requires individuals with superior skills. In can be argued that even though Representative Democracies aim to include the opinions of every citizen only a small group of society chooses to participate in the political process and it's often those from a more elite section of society. Theorists suggest that Elites are a positive aspect of Representative Democracy since citizens elect candidates who possess various characteristics which are appealing to those voting for example the ability to articulate various political principles, and

are therefore necessary to a Representative Democracy. Globalisation is a process whereby corporations are able to operate across borders, it can be argued that such a process has harmed democracy since governments often take action without any national debate and discussion and in the process has created a group of Elites whose opinions are considered superior to those of the majority.

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[1] [http://www. becal. net/lc/re_pshe_ce/citizenship/ce_resources/year11democ2. pdf](http://www.becal.net/lc/re_pshe_ce/citizenship/ce_resources/year11democ2.pdf)

[2] Lynch, T D & Dicker, J D (1998) p. 191

[3] Burke cited in Eagles, M *et al* (2003) p. 195

[4] Held, D (2006) p. 73

[5] Heywood, A (2003) p. 222

[6] Heywood, A (ibid)

[7] Faulks, K (1999) p. 39

[8] Faulks, K (ibid)

[9] [http://www. polisci. berkeley. edu/Faculty/bio/permanent/Ansell, C/Encyclopedia/Oligarchy. pdf](http://www.polisci.berkeley.edu/Faculty/bio/permanent/Ansell,C/Encyclopedia/Oligarchy.pdf)

[10] Faulks, K (ibid) p. 40

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[11] http://www.becal.net/lc/re_pshe_ce/citizenship/ce_resources/year11democ2.pdf(ibid)

[12] Manin, B (2007) cited in Landermore, H (2008)

[13] Manin, B (ibid)

[14] Heywood, A (2003) p. 301

[15] Heywood, A (ibid)

[16] Herman, S (1999)

[17] Herman, S (ibid)