

What is elitism and anti elitism politics essay



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Elites derive from a fundamental and universal fact of social life, namely, the absence in any large collectivity of a robust common interest. While it is true that most large collectivities rest on a base of social and cultural understandings, these tend to be ambiguous and rough. The satisfactions some of their members seek are only partly compatible with the satisfactions sought by other members. Members constantly claim statuses and other valued goods for themselves, their kin, friends, and allies that other members do not accept as fully legitimate. Acceding to these claims is often more a matter of judging that it is dangerous or inexpedient to resist them than of recognizing that the persons and groups making the claims have some right to do so. In large collectivities common interest is fairly minimal and must always be supplemented by authoritative decisions that dissenters and opponents dare not or find it inexpedient to resist. Elites may be defined as persons who, by virtue of their strategic locations in large or otherwise pivotal organizations and movements, are able to affect political outcomes regularly and substantially. Put differently, elites are persons with the organized capacity to make real political trouble without being promptly repressed. They consist not only of prestigious and "established" leaders - top politicians, important businessmen, high-level civil servants, senior military officers - but also, in varying degrees in different societies, relatively transitory and less individually known leaders of mass organizations such as trade unions, important voluntary associations, and politically consequential mass movements. "Counter-elites" are subsumed by this definition because they clearly have the organized capacity, although perhaps mainly through negation, to affect political outcomes regularly and substantially. It is important to stress that this is a limited and specifically political definition of

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elites. It is restricted to persons who are at the top of the pyramid or pyramids of political, economic, and social power (Putnam, 1976). It does not consider all those in a society who enjoy high occupational, educational, or cultural statuses to be elites in a political sense. As defined, national political elites are not large in number. Geraint Parry (1969/2005) has observed that the entire British elite could be seated with ease in a soccer stadium. Using strict organizational and positional criteria, as well as data about sizes of elite networks, some researchers have estimated that the national political elite in the United States numbers perhaps ten thousand persons (Dye, 2002), maybe half this number in medium-sized countries like France (Dogan, 2003), Australia (Higley, Deacon & Smart, 1979) or Germany (Hoffmann-Lange, 1992), and about fifteen hundred in small countries like Denmark (Christiansen, Möller & Togeby, 2001) and Norway (Gulbrandsen and Engelstad, 2002). This last estimate of fewer than two thousand persons is probably the most plausible for all countries during the early modern historical period and all but the most populous developing countries today

Elitism:

Elitism is the belief or attitude that those individuals who are considered members of the elite - a select group of people with outstanding personal abilities, intellect, wealth, specialized training or experience, or other distinctive attributes - are those whose views on a matter are to be taken the most seriously or carry the most weight; whose views and/or actions are most likely to be constructive to society as a whole; or whose extraordinary skills, abilities or wisdom render them especially fit to govern [1].

Alternatively, the term elitism may be used to describe a situation in which

power is concentrated in the hands of the elite. Opposed to elitism are “ anti-elitism,” “ populism,” and the political theory of pluralism. Elite theory is the sociological or political science analysis of elite influence in society – elite theorists regard pluralism as a utopian ideal. Elitism may also refer to situations in which an elite individual assumes special privileges and responsibilities in the hope that this arrangement will benefit humanity. At times, elitism is closely related to social class and what sociologists call social stratification. Members of the upper classes are sometimes, though inaccurately, known as the “ social elite.” The term elitism is also sometimes misused to denote situations in which a group of people claiming to possess high abilities or simply an in-group or cadre grant themselves extra privileges at the expense of others. This debased form of elitism may be described as

discrimination

(1) The belief: that government ought in principle, always and everywhere, to be confined to elites. Rarely a worked-out doctrine in its own right, more often a piece of unexamined value judgement, or a view which follows from some more general argument in political philosophy, as for example in Plato’s Republic.

(2) The belief: that government is in practice confined to elites; that, following a maxim of Hume, ‘ ought implies can’ (in other words, that there is no point in saying that government ought to be controlled by the people if in practice it cannot); and that we might just as well accept what we are bound to have anyhow. These views are especially associated with Mosca and with

Pareto in the early twentieth century, and with Schumpeter in mid-century. All three writers shade into elitism in sense 1 because they go on to produce normative justifications of rule by elites in a democracy. However, their earlier arguments do not in themselves imply that if democratic control of the government were somehow achievable it would be undesirable.

(3) The belief: that government is in practice confined to elites; that this has often been justified by arguments from Plato or Schumpeter; but that this is undesirable because elite rule is in practice rule on behalf of the vested interests of (usually economic) elites.

Defining of elite (Elitism):

There is no single definition of the concept of elite. What the literature reflects is divergent array of definition of the term. The lack of a unified meaning of elite emanates from the scope and limit of those included in the spectrum of elite rank, given the universality of the accepted meaning of the term itself. Therefore, various definitions arise and different models and constructs develop as frames of analysis.

Despite the differences in definitions, all elite theorists seem to agree on one thing: the powerful position of a small group of individuals or groups who either shape or influence decisions that affect national outcomes. Thus, all actors occupying key positions in the political, economic, military, governmental, cultural, and administrative institutions and organizations are considered members of the elite because they affect the national outcomes.

According to Mosca (1939),

In all societies, from less developed to the most advanced, two classes of people appear, a class that rules and a class that is ruled...

The class that rules is few, whereas the more numerous class, is directed at and controlled by the first, in a manner that is now more or less legal, now more or less arbitrary and violent. (50)

The few elites "acquire a stake in preserving the organization and their position in it. This motive gives leaders a perspective different from that of the organization's members. An elite is then inevitable in any social organization" Dye and Zeigler, 1993: 2-3) To Michels (1959), "he who says organization, says oligarchy" (70), and "government is always government by the few, whether in the name of the few, the one, or the many" (Lasswell and Lerner, 1952: 7)

According to Gwen Moore (1979), the term political elite refer to "persons who by virtue of their institutional positions have a high potential to influence national policy making" therefore, it "includes politicians, government officials, and the leaders of various interest groups, which attempt to influence the allocation of values in society" (Moore, 1979; see also Parry, 1969: 13) more clearly, Higley and Burton (1989) define "national elites as persons who are able, by virtue of their authoritative positions in powerful organizations and movements of whatever kind, to affect national political outcomes regularly and substantially" (18)

In defense of elite theory, and signifying the importance of the organizational context of elites, Higley, Burton, and Field (1973) maintain that they have "consistently followed Weber and Movement leaders are elites only to the

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extent that the movements are bureaucratically structured and thus powerful on a sustained basis." Those leaders then " can affect political outcomes regularly and substantially" (Higley, Burton, and Field, 1990)

Dogan and Higley (1996) define elites as the few hundred or at most few thousand persons who head the major institutions, organizations, and movements in a society and who are therefore able to impel or impede political decisions on a regular basis. Elites consist, therefore, of the top leaders of political parties, governmental bureaucracies, large and /or pivotally located business firms and large unions, the military, the media, professional, religious, educational, and other major organizations, as well as the leaders of powerful interest groups and mass movements.

Because these definitions are too broad, inclusive, and confusing, they are subject to interpretations and challenges, such as the one offered by Alan Knight (1996) in his extensive and provocative analysis of elite theory.

To Hunter (1959), elites are the " top leaders" who shape and control the " power structure, " whereas to Mills (1956), they are the " power elite,"

Composed of men whose positions enable them to transcend the ordinary environments of ordinary men and women: they are in positions to make decisions having major consequences Whether they do or do not make such decisions is less important than the fact that they do occupy such pivotal positions: their failure to act, their failure to make decisions, is itself an act that is often of greater consequence than the decisions they do make, for they are in command of the major hierarchies and organizations of modern society. They run the big corporations. They run the machinery of the state

and claim its prerogatives. They direct the military establishment. They occupy the strategic command posts of the social structure, in which are now centered the effective means of the power and the wealth and the celebrity which they enjoy. The power elite are not solitary rulers. Advisors and consultants, spokesmen and opinion makers, are often the captains of their higher thought and decision. Immediately below the elite are the professional politicians of the middle levels of power, in the Congress and in the pressure groups, as well as among the new and old upper classes of town and city and region

Mills' definition of the concept of power elite is both clear and comprehensive in that it includes not only the macro elites, but also the micro elites who operate the organizations and institutions controlled by the power elite. This view is shared by the more contemporary elite theorists who focus in their studies on interlocking organizational networks of the elites. Despite the common tenets emphasized in these definitions, the following perspectives on elite theory may be discerned.

Types of Elite:

Following the ideas of Machiavelli, he distinguished two main types of elite group:

- a. "Lion elites" who were able to rule by force (for example, military regimes).
- b. "Fox elites" who were able to rule by manipulation (for example, liberal democratic regimes)

Characteristics of the “ elite”

Attributes that identify elite vary; personal achievement may not be essential. Elite attributes include:

Rigorous study of, or great accomplishment within, a particular field of study

A long track record of competence in a demanding field

An extensive history of dedication and effort in service to a specific discipline (e. g., medicine or martial arts)

A high degree of accomplishment, training or wisdom within a given field

An elite fighter, for example, is one whose training, resolve, and experience in combat place him at the top of his field. Most nations employ some kind of Special Forces made up of elite soldiers whose training goes far beyond what is typical for the average soldier. The academic elite, on the other hand, comprises only those professors whose studies are likely to shape their respective disciplines for years to come. One synonym for elite might be “ world class,” indicating that the individual in question is capable of participating effectively at the very highest levels of his or her chosen discipline.

Anti-elitism

Elitism as a pejorative term

The term “ elitism” or the title “ elitist” can be used resentfully [2] by a person who is not a member of an elite, or is a member but resents the elite position or uses it in a condescending or cynical manner in order to ridicule or criticize practices which discriminate on the basis of ability or attributes.

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Often, accusing someone of being an “ elitist” is used as a pejorative remark meant to imply that the person in question does not in fact belong to an elite, but is merely a hanger-on. Sometimes, particularly in political circles, it is used simply as a generic insult, with little to no literal basis for the term’s use beyond a general animosity towards the target.

Elitism versus egalitarianism

Elitism can be interpreted as encouraging the exclusion of large numbers of people from positions of privilege or power. Thus, many populists seek the social equality of Egalitarianism, Populism, Socialism, or Communism. They may also support affirmative action, social security, luxury taxes, and increasingly high progressive taxes for the wealthiest members of society. All of these measures seek to reduce the gap of power between the elite and those who are not elite.

Elitism versus pluralism

Pluralism is the belief that public policy decisions should be (or, descriptively, are) the result of the struggle of forces exerted by large populations (workers, consumers, retirees, parents, etc.) directly or indirectly in the policy-making process. This is contrasted with elitism which is the belief that decisions should be (or are) being made essentially according to the interests or ideas of elites. There is a difference, however, between the idea of being more able to fulfill a political task and the actual knowing of the specialization and specifications of each corporation or other group among the general population and its particular hopes and needs, which suggests a way of cooperation which has been recently put into practice in some

countries between politicians and groups of citizens which have some remote resemblances to Corporatism.

Elitism and education

Elitism in the context of education is the practice of concentrating attention on or allocating funding to the students who rank highest in a particular field of endeavor, with the other students being deemed less capable of achievement or as holding less promise for the society's future. For example, a politician who promotes specialized biochemistry classes for highly intelligent students in an effort to cure diseases might be accused of elitism. Elitism in education could be based upon learning ability, knowledge, or other abilities. An elite school could merely be a wealthy school or an old school.

Power elite:

A Power Elite, in political and sociological theory, is a small group of people who control a disproportionate amount of wealth, privilege, and access to decision-making of global consequence. The term was coined by Charles Wright Mills in his 1956 book, *The Power Elite*. *The Power Elite* (1956) describes the relationship between political, military, and economic elite (people at the pinnacles of these three institutions), noting that these people share a common world view, 1) the "military metaphysic"- a military definition of reality, possess 2) "class identity"- recognizing themselves separate and superior to the rest of society, have 3) interchangeability: i. e. the move within and between the three institutional structures and hold interlocking directorates 4) cooptation/socialization: of prospective new members is done based on how well they "clone" themselves socially after

such elite. Further these elite in the “ big three” institutional orders have an “ uneasy” alliance based upon their “ community of interests” driven by the military metaphysic, which has transformed the economy into a ‘ permanent war economy’. In critical work, the US Power elite consists of members of the Business/Corporate Community, Academia, politicians, media editors, military service personnel, and high-profile journalists. From here on, a general form of consensus building and homogenising of elite members’ views is eventually achieved. Social Structure forming Power Elite the American way and the American Dream can be defined as “ that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position” ([James Truslow Adams, The Epic of America]). However, it has been argued that a relatively fixed group of privileged Americans shape our economy and government solely because of their higher wealth and social status. This idea goes against the original American way, and begins a new one. This new American way involves a fixed group of Americans, called the power elite. The power elite stems from many groups forming into one:

Corporate Community: - This group includes rich corporations, banks and agribusinesses. These tend to dominate the federal government in

Washington. Growth Coalitions: - This group includes real estate, construction and land development companies. These tend to dominate the local governments. Both the corporate communities and growth coalitions sometimes will have conflicting ideas and competition between each other over profits and investment opportunities. However, they tend to have the same policies affecting their general welfare. These groups have the ability to organize and defend their interests due to their large wealth and income. The owners and managers of these large income producing properties hold a great share of all of the income and wealth in the US. This is more than any other industrial democracy (they are 1% of the entire US population). By holding this share of income, these groups clearly create the dominating class in the US. This dominating class has name of its own: Corporate Rich: - This group becomes more of a common social group. They belong to the same social clubs, they vacation at the same summer and winter resorts and they send their children to the same private schools. They create the [social upper class]. Place Entrepreneurs: - This group tends to be filled with members of the growth coalition. They sell locations and buildings. By doing this, they become the local upper class in their respective cities. Because of this, they tend to mingle with the corporate rich in vacation/resort settings or educational settings. Policy - Formation Network: - This group tends to be filled with members from both the corporate rich and the place entrepreneurs/growth coalition. They develop and direct non-profit organizations, charity foundations and policy discussion groups. As these non-profit groups join at a national level, they are able to create policies for local communities and national level city development organizations. All of

these groups take a part in creating the ultimate power elite, the leadership group for the corporate rich as a whole.

Power Elite: - This group tends to have corporate owners join with top level executives in the corporate community and the policy formation network. This group tends to be the wealthiest in the US and use this group title to create policies for the US to use on a national level. However, it is clear that not all people in the power elite group are involved in governance. Some simply enjoy the lifestyle wealth can bring.

Characteristics of the Power Elite:

According to C. Wright Mills, among the best known power-elite theorists, the governing elite in the United States draws its members from three areas: (1) the highest political leaders including the president and a handful of key cabinet members and close advisers; (2) major corporate owners and directors; and (3) high-ranking military officers.

Even though these individuals constitute a close-knit group, they are not part of a conspiracy that secretly manipulates events in their own selfish interest. For the most part, the elite respects civil liberties, follows established constitutional principles, and operates openly and peacefully. It is not a dictatorship; it does not rely on terror, a secret police, or midnight arrests to get its way. It does not have to, as we will see.

Nor is its membership closed, although many members have enjoyed a head start in life by virtue of their being born into prominent families.

Nevertheless, those who work hard, enjoy good luck, and demonstrate a

willingness to adopt elite values do find it possible to work into higher circles from below.

If the elite do not derive its power from repression or inheritance, from where does its strength come? Basically it comes from control of the highest positions in the political and business hierarchy and from shared values and beliefs.

Elite approach in politics:

Those who disagree with pluralism such as C. Wright Mills argue that a few people in all societies manipulate the levers of government to their benefit. As a review of the pluralist approach, Elite theory suggests that focus should not be on individuals and the freely formed groups based on interests but that society breaks down into two groups the few on top who hold power and rule (the ones Plato referred to as philosopher kings) or the Oligarchy The many below who are governed by them. Elite theory acknowledges that human society is not all the same and that the differences among people in society make elite rule or the rule of the oligarchy inevitable elites straddle both the public and private realms. For example different political elites and corporate elites become bureaucratic elites over time and influence the direction of state policies in their different public and private capacities elites of different groups in society – political, corporate, workers, ethnic, regional, and other groups of common bond tend to find what is called Elite Accommodation elites also tend to reproduce themselves as they come to rely on each other for advice and action. They come to share a common world view and defend their common interests some have suggested that the state elites can become autonomous from society through this process of elite accommodation. What emerges is what is called the Embedded Stat Critics of elite theory have pointed to it over-emphasis of the cohesion of the elites or oligarchy and lack of attention to the competition within the ruling elites.

Further, that in modern society political constraints makes it impossible for rulers to ignore the interests of the masses. Elite approach focuses on elites

domination of political life with an alienated majority accepting their role in society, while the class analysis approach suggests that social classes arise in society because of the nature of the organization of the economy and exist in antagonism against each other

Elite theory:

Elite theory is a theory of the state which seeks to describe and explain the power relationships in modern society. It argues that a small minority, comprised of members of the economic elite and policy-planning networks, hold the most power no matter what happens in elections in a country. Through positions in corporations or on corporate boards, and influence over the policy-planning networks through financial support of foundations or positions with think tanks or policy-discussion groups, members of the “elite” are able to have significant power over policy decisions of corporations and governments. The theory stands in opposition to pluralism in suggesting that democracy is a utopian ideal. It also stands in opposition to state autonomy theory.

Classical and New Elite Theory

Although the idea probably always has been present in some form, elitism emerged as a recognizable and clearly defined part of Western political thought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The leading contributors to the theory were Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, and Robert Michels. These writers attacked classical democratic thought and also Aristotle and Karl Marx. Majority rule, they insisted, is impossible. Every society is divided into those who rule and those who are ruled; and the rulers constitute only a small minority of any society. Aristotle's classification,

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which divided political systems into three types (rule by one, rule by a few, and rule by the many), does not fit reality either, for no man is capable of ruling by himself, and the many, too, lack the ability to govern. It is the few, under any political system, who exercise effective control. And Marx, with his emphasis on a class struggle that in the end (following the victory of the working class) leads to social harmony in a classless society, was also wrong. History features a continuing struggle among elites. That struggle will never end, and a classless society cannot be created. Moreover, to the pioneers in the development of elitist theory, Marx placed too much emphasis on economics and not enough on politics, which could be autonomous.

Classical elitist theory did not maintain merely that the active, socially recognizable people in a country made its important decisions-whether from within offices of government, from somewhere behind the scenes, or from completely outside the state apparatus. It emphatically asserted that the common man, however numerous within a society in absolute or relative terms, did not. Analysts of elites, who generally focus on the distribution of power rather than on the allocation of values, or on property and other wealth forms, differ somewhat over the degree of participation in government or, more generally, the political process that is necessary for a member of the elite accurately to be judged a member of what Mosca characterizes as “ the ruling class.” A society’s elite is usually thought to be a stable entity, self-sustaining and constant over time. Yet the actual group that is in office can change markedly and very quickly. The concept of an elite therefore may need to be understood as encompassing all those who might govern as well as those who in fact do govern.

However “ elite” is precisely understood, elitist theory is clear in the basic point that a minority, rather than the masses, controls things. The general population of a country-the common man-is ineffective. Even in societies with elections and other democratic mechanisms, it is posited, the ruling elite functions in a way that is largely independent of control by a popular majority. However, it made need a justifying doctrine. That the elite ordinarily functions according to a “ political formula,” in Mosca’s term, is what makes its rule effective and acceptable to the masses Thus, in theory, there can be a democratic elitism, however paradoxical that may seem.

A “ new elite paradigm,” building on the work of Mosca and other classical theorists, emerged in the 1980s and 1990s among comparative political sociologists. It drew attention to the occurrence, and the important effects, of divisions that may arise within the elite of a society. Its central proposition, as stated by John Higley and Michael Burton (1989), is as follows: “ A disunified national elite, which is the most common type, produces a series of unstable regimes that tend to oscillate between authoritarian and democratic forms over varying intervals. A consensually unified national elite, which is historically much rarer, produces a stable regime that may evolve into a modern democracy, as in Sweden, or Britain, or the United States, if economic and other facilitative conditions permit.”

In the United States, normally, internal and external conditions have favored consensual unity within the nation’s elite. Of course, the American Revolution and, later, the Civil War, are the major exceptions to this generalization. During those periods, divisions ran so deep as to produce counter-elites. As the political sociologist Barrington Moore, Jr., and the <https://assignbuster.com/what-is-elitism-and-anti-elitism-politics-essay/>

political historian C. Vann Woodward have shown, the reconciliation between North and South that occurred following post-Civil War Reconstruction was in significant part a result of a complex bargain between the elites in formerly opposed geographical sections. After the late nineteenth century, issues of foreign policy have on occasion divided the American elite as well. A by-product of this has been a widening of participation in the national debate over foreign policy. That this amounts to a “ democratization” of American foreign policymaking, however, is highly disputable.

Elite theorists:

Wright Mills

C. Wright Mills published his book *The Power Elite* in 1956 claiming a new perspective on systems of power in the USA. He identified a triumvirate of power groups – political, economic and military – who form a distinguishable, although not unified body, wielding power in the American state:

He proposed that this group had been generated through a process of rationalisation at work in all advanced industrial societies where by the mechanisms of power became concentrated funnelling overall control into the hands of a limited, somewhat corrupt group (Bottomore 1993). This reflected a decline in politics as an arena for debate and relegation to a merely formal level of discourse (Mills 1956). This macro-scale analysis sought to point out the degradation of democracy in “ advanced” societies and the fact that power generally lies outside the boundaries of elected representatives.

Floyd Hunter

The elite theory analysis of power was also applied on the micro scale in community power studies such as that by Floyd Hunter (1953). Hunter examined in detail the power relationships evident in his “ Regional City” looking for the “ real” holders of power rather than those in obvious official positions. He posited a structural-functional approach which mapped the hierarchies and webs of interconnection operating within the city - mapping relationships of power between businessmen, politicians, clergy etc. The study was promoted to debunk current concepts of any ‘ democracy’ present within urban politics and reaffirm the arguments for a true representative democracy (Hunter 1953).

This type of analysis was also used in later, larger scale, studies such as that carried out by M. Schwarz examining the power structures within the sphere of the corporate elite in the USA (Schwarz 1987).

James Burnham

James Burnham’s early work *The Managerial Revolution* sought to express the movement of all functional power into the hands of managers rather than politicians or businessmen - separating ownership and control (Bottomore 193). Many of these id