

Elite theory, in political science, theoretical perspective according to which (1) a community's affairs are best handled by a small subset of its members and (2) in modern societies such an arrangement is in fact inevitable. These two tenets are ideologically allied but logically separable.

The basic normative question underlying elite theory is whether the relative power of any group ought to exceed its relative size. The affirmative answer goes back to ancient Greece, where the disproportionate influence of distinguished minorities was defended by reference to their superior wisdom or virtue, as in Plato's "guardian" class of rulers. The Greek precursor to the English aristocracy (*aristokratia*) referred to rule by "the best men" (the *aristoi*). The empirical assumption behind the defense of elite rule at the time was the unequal distribution of the finest human traits.

The inevitability of elite rule could not be taken for granted, however, as attested by the fact that ancient, medieval, and early modern political writers undertook a constant struggle against rule by ordinary people, or democracy, which was often equated with the absence of order, or anarchy. That explicitly antidemocratic posture was characteristic of Christian writers such as Thomas Aquinas, the 13th-century theologian. The French word *élite*, from which the modern English is taken, means simply "the elect" or "the chosen" and thus accommodates the notion that people of outstanding ability hold their power and privileges by divine sanction.

It is sometimes forgotten that later revolutionary ideologies held fast to the classic form of normative elitism, even borrowing the Platonic language of guardianship. In the 16th and 17th centuries, Calvinists referred to the superior personal characteristics

of aristocrats in order to justify armed resistance against illegitimate monarchs; John Milton's defense of the regicide in England in 1649 and subsequent rule by Puritan "saints" represents one instance of that type of ideology. Milton was admired by John Adams, the American revolutionary, and in the 1780s James Madison and Alexander Hamilton defended the new institutions of the U.S. Congress and the Supreme Court precisely as good guardians—privileged agencies more capable of serving the people's interests than the people themselves. Those defenses of elite rule are the more notable because, in some cases, their authors ostensibly rejected the ancient assumption of unequally distributed capacities in favour of some notion of natural equality.

By the late 19th century, attention to the empirical aspects of elite power complemented normative elitism without fundamentally altering it. The Italian social theorists Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto were among the first to stipulate that elite rule is inevitable and to explore the ramifications of that axiom, mainly by analyzing the reproduction and transformation of elite groups. The famous "iron law of oligarchy," advanced by the German-born Italian political sociologist and economist Robert Michels, was more systematic: instead of merely positing the inevitability of elite domination, Michels tried to explain it by reference to the peculiar organizational features of modern politics, undoubtedly influenced on that point by the German sociologist Max Weber. Michels's account was unusually compelling because of his own egalitarian sympathies and his case studies of German

socialist organizations. In the face of his “iron law,” Michels concluded, in evident despair, that “democracy is the end but not the means.”

Michels’s conclusion underscored the complex relation of elite theory to Marxian political thought. Mosca, Pareto, and Michels accepted that governing elites are usually (albeit not necessarily) friendly to leading economic interests, but they rejected Karl Marx’s analysis of historical change as the result of class conflict. They also spurned what they took to be his democratic faith in the ultimately decisive influence of the most numerous, the labouring class. Yet empirical elitism also appealed to Marxian figures such as Vladimir Lenin and Antonio Gramsci. In the years following World War II, however, the classic elitists’ writings were much in vogue among American social scientists committed to a kind of liberal constitutionalism. The conservative American philosopher James Burnham, a founding editor of the *National Review*, depicted Mosca, Pareto, and Michels as Machiavellians whose realistic analysis of elite actors and rejection of utopian egalitarianism represented the best hope of democracy—as defined in terms of the law-governed liberty that emerges from interelite checks and balances. The 20th-century American economist Joseph Schumpeter used the elitists less conspicuously but also redefined democracy in terms congenial to the elite legacy as nothing more than electoral competition between elites vying for popular authorization to rule.

Schumpeter was the last great political writer to explicitly marry empirical elitism to normative elitism. Though influenced by Schumpeter, later approaches, such as behavioralism and rational-choice theory, were meant to be value neutral.

Nevertheless, rational-choice theory strengthened empirical elitism by offering new arguments for the inevitability of elite rule. For example, the American economist Kenneth Arrow's impossibility theorem showed that ordinary voting procedures could not in principle express a stable collective will, implying that agenda setting and other procedural maneuvers by a few strategically placed actors are indispensable to public choices.