

Why have elitists been so sceptical about the prospects for democracy?

Examination Number: Y1009060

College: James

ABSTRACT

Elitism is a continuing focus for political scientists. Their belief that the minority will always rule the majority, elitists contradict the liberal democratic model, widely viewed as the ideal for any country. Elitists challenge its premise of legitimacy of the people. The major writings of elitists will be the basis of analysis of their scepticism of democracy. I aim to show that not all elitists are sceptical of democracy. I will argue that the scepticism of elitists regarding democracy is due to personal circumstances. Furthermore I hope to show that elitists do not need to be so sceptical of democracy.

In order to answer this question the key terms of elitism and democracy need to be defined. Mosca, Pareto and Michel's are the classical elite theorists whose scepticism of democracy I am investigating. Two modern elite theorists Charles Wright Mills and Joseph Schumpeter will provide contrasting modern interpretations of elite theory. Conclusions of elitist scepticism of democracy can then be drawn.

Arising at the end of the nineteenth century, elitism is a theory of political science. It stands in direct contradiction to the premise of democracy in all societies. Its theory is that in all societies past and present, minorities will rule the majority. The assertion is the eternal inevitability of minority rule, and thus, the denial to the majority of popular sovereignty. Elitists claim to be realists and assert that democracy will never be achieved. The classic elitist theorists: Mosca, Pareto and Michel's, wanted show how democracy was simply the façade hiding the realities of minority power. They wanted to demonstrate how popular power could never be realised. The **'iron law of oligarchy'** Michel's infamous quote crystallise elitists belief that democracy or popular power is impossible. Elitists offer a scientific and explanatory approach to politics. It is a realistic approach that tells us what the situation is, not what it should be. (Schwarzmantel, 1994)

Elitism is clearly marked by a fundamental division between people in all societies, the elite and the mass. Gaetano Mosca states who makes up these two distinct groups, the elites are, "always the less numerous, performs all political functions and enjoys the advantages that power brings", while the minority, "always more numerous class is directed and controlled by the first" (Mosca, 1896: 50). The power structure in a democratic society is totally split between the top: the governing elite (Pareto), a ruling class (Mosca) or oligarchy (Michels). Below them is the mass, people or the non-elite. The elite are different from the people for a number of reasons, depending on what society values; they possess what the mass does not. Certain characteristics are true of all elites; this enables them to exercise their power. Organisational cohesion along with intellectual superiority, that gives the elite the ability to manipulate the mass. They possess the capacity to achieve political success and will form the governing elite. Elitists see it as inevitable that human beings are not equal and that the elite will possess the necessary tools for political power while the mass will not. For elitist theorists democracy will always be seen as a sham, which will always be unattainable with minority rule. (Schwarzmantel, 1994)

Democracy is where the people have or share in the power of society. The existence of the ruling elite as mentioned, makes democracy impossible. The presence of this elite is as inevitable as their ability to possess the skills to maintain and control political power. The inescapable gap between the two groups is compounded by the social and political situation. The governing elite will ensure their position is maintained and will never yield to popular beliefs of the masses but conserve the notion of democracy to mask their real control. Democracy is impractical where as elitists believe the power is held by a minority not attributed to them by the majority. As long as there is a governing elite there will be no democracy. Pareto's power structure is demonstrated by narrow triangle with the elite at the top broadening to the base with the mass. (Pareto, 1915) This is true of all societies and further demonstrates how democracy will never exist while there is ruling elite. (Schwarzmantel, 1994)

We now must turn to our classical theorists in order to understand why they in particular had no hope for true democracy. Firstly to Vilfredo Pareto who's central theory was the 'circulation of elites'. Precisely, in every field of human endeavour there is natural hierarchy of talent. Those who have the most skill in that area will inevitably rise to the top. Amongst these elites those who are most skilled in politics will govern it. Employing the Machiavellian theory of cunning and force, the most successful groups will be those who balance the use of 'lions' and 'foxes'. 'Lions' were those who used force to preserve power while 'foxes' used their cunning and manipulation qualities keep power. However most elites were unable to strike this balance. The ideal was that elites were open to new talent from the masses however they closed themselves off. Preferring instead to pass power through lineage thus diluting the original 'elite' skill, so they decay and lose power being replaced by another set of elites, thus the 'circulation of elites'. (Pareto, 1966) He hoped to ensure that people saw that popular rule through the existing democratic institutions were impossible. (Birch, 2001) His scepticism of democracy was because we simply continue to live under different sets of elites. Even when one group falls another simply replaces it. We will continually be passed between different groups bent on maintaining elite rule and so deny us democracy.

Gaetano Mosca major contribution to elitist theory was the articulation of minority rule. He showed the history of societies could be shown by the ability of the minority to control government and rule the majority through organization coherence and a quality admired in that society. This may be military or political skill but it confirms their dominance over the masses. He believed each set of elites possessed a 'political formula' (Mosca, 1939), which "maintains and legitimise its grip on power" (Evans, 1995). Elite circulation would occur usually by power being passed through inheritance though it could be overthrown if the 'political formula' failed. He was sure that these elites represented the interests of their own with only the most cursory acknowledgment of the people's wishes. He had little hope for democracy; he argued that the existing system could not be changed. Democracy was not a reality while elites continued to rule with only thought for furthering their own interests and keeping the masses passive.

We now turn to Robert Michels whose main work was *Political Parties* published in 1911. Here he set out his theory that even within the organisations of democracies- political parties, they were elitist or oligarchic and would be forever. This was his famous "iron law of oligarchy" stating, "who says organisations says oligarchy" (Michels, 1962: 365). It was inevitable that those who represented the people would dominate and render democracy impossible. Democracy is made impossible by impossible the structures meant to maintain it. Organisation means representation however this representation ensures oligarchy and the domination of the representatives. This was true for all societies organisations and groups ensuring democracy was impossible (Schwarzmantel, 1994). Michels believed that democracy "is a treasure no one will ever discover" (Michels, 1962: 405), while organisations face the stranglehold of elite domination.

Having dealt with the classical elitist theorists we now turn to a modern example of support for elitism. Charles Wright Mills wrote in 1956, at the height of the Cold War, *The Power Elite*. In this he warned of higher circles dominating American power. He claimed there was power elite of America comprised of

warlords, corporation chief and political directorate. He showed that within these higher circles there was a shared ideology within an established social circle (Mills, 1956). He differed from the classical theorists, as he believed democracy had existed but had been eroded by the increase of size and centralization of institutions. The backbone of his theory is that there is a psychological unity amongst the rich, which ensures collective action amongst elites (Birch, 2001). Mills again has little hope for true democracy with the existence of the class of rich elites bent on dominating power.

At this point we have to deal with those who assert the compatibility of elitism with democracy. This is proposed in Joseph Schumpeter's *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. Here he accepts the classical theory that power flows from policy makers at the top to the mass. But at intervals such as on Election Day groups of elites such as leadership teams compete for power given that is given by the masses. The masses are given the power to decide which elites they elect (Schumpeter, 1943). Therefore Schumpeter's assumption of democracy is the right of the people to produce a government. Seemingly power remains in the hands of Mosca's 'political class' however it must be popular due to the multiplicity of elites available. He rejects Michel's belief in part that the masses are passive (Schwarzmantel, 1994). There is therefore some crossover in terms of democracy and elitism. Elites exist in society however democracy is achieved by the will of the people choosing who they want to vote for.

Looking closely at the four theorists we have investigated, the situation they were writing in as well as their aspirations must be taken into account. Pareto developed a highly specialized plan with its own terminology. It was more of a conceptual framework than a theory. Indeed modern scholars look at his work as outdated and a minor actor in the creation of the elitist theory. Mosca, a contemporary of Pareto was a nineteenth century liberal. Had he lived later he probably would have endorsed democratic ideas. Michel's writing was largely focused on the dilemmas facing European social democratic process rather than the democratic process. Charles Wright-Mills work is focused on the United States. He was someone who was alienated by the society and only writes about its failings. He does not argue against democracy as a system of government merely America's inadequacies. (Birch, 1994) Elitist theories therefore have to be contextualized by their creator's individual beliefs and ideologies. It is the individual who has little hope of democracy; this may not reflect the true situation.

Scepticism of democracy by elitists is however, clouded by the personal situation of elitists. Elitist theory is flawed in some key areas; firstly it is very difficult to sustain in an empirical sense. We have seen that there is no theory that demonstrates that democratic systems must always be elitist in practice. There are only limited accounts of elite networks within key institutions of state. (Evans, 1995) Elitists who are sceptical of democracy fail to provide a total explanation to support their beliefs.

Bibliography

Vifredo Pareto, Sociological Writings, Selected and Introduced by S.E. Finer
(London, Pall Mall Press, 1915/1919: 1966)

Gaetano Mosca, The Ruling Class (New York 1896/1965)

Robert Michels, Political Parties (New York, 1915)

J A Schumpeter, Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy (London, Unwin University
Books, 1943)

Mark Evans 'Elitism', being Chapter 12 of D. Marsh and G. Stoker, Theory and
Methods in Political Science (Macmillan, 1995)

John Schwarzmantel, The State in Contemporary Society (1994)

A.H. Birch, Concepts and theories of Modern Democracy (Routledge, 2001)