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THE PALGRAVE HANDBOOK OF POLITICAL ELITES

Edited by
Heinrich Best and John Higley

The Palgrave Handbook of Political Elites

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Acknowledgments

The *Palgrave Handbook of Political Elites* is the first to survey this long-established and highly developed field of empirical research and theoretical investigation. Given the field's maturity and diversity, it was a challenging task to conceive, organize, and carry out a comprehensive inventory of scholarly accomplishments in the study of political elites.

To achieve this aim required a broad mobilization of experts in the field, so that 35 scholars finally joined as contributors. We thank them for their readiness to share their expertise, submit to the often tedious task of producing standardized texts within the format restrictions of a handbook, and meet deadlines. We offer particular thanks to the section editors who were largely responsible for recruiting, instructing, and working with contributors. Most importantly, we give special and personal thanks to Verona Christmas-Best for the unenviable task of organizing the 6 parts and 40 chapters of the handbook into a coherent whole, for overseeing the collation of materials associated with the chapters, and for being the liaison with Palgrave Macmillan when preparing and delivering the final manuscript. Without Verona's indefatigable work, the handbook would not exist.

We also want to acknowledge institutional and infrastructural support for work on the handbook. It is no coincidence that all section editors have been officers, and the two senior editors have been chairs, of the Research Committee on Political Elites (RC02) of the International Political Science Association (IPSA). It was at the IPSA World Congress in Madrid in 2012 that the committee agreed that creating a handbook should be one of its principal undertakings. During subsequent years, the committee provided and

supported the networks for the collaborative effort, and its panels and workshops served as meeting points for face-to-face communications between handbook contributors and editors.

The *Palgrave Handbook of Political Elites* honors the memory of Professor Mattei Dogan, who created the committee in 1972 as an international and interdisciplinary platform for researchers studying political elites and who served as its leader until 2001 when age and health required him to turn the committee's leadership over to the next generation of political elite scholars.

We thank Jena University and the Cologne branch of the *Gesellschaft Sozialwissenschaftlicher Infrastruktureinrichtungen* (GESIS) for hosting two meetings of the handbook's board of editors, and John Higley thanks the University of Texas at Austin for faculty travel grants that enabled him to attend those meetings, as well as an editorial meeting hosted by Maurizio Cotta and family at their home in Robella, Italy. Finally, we thank Palgrave Macmillan for taking on the task of publishing the handbook. Palgrave Macmillan staff members, especially Imogen Gordon-Clark in London and Dhanalakshmi Jayavel in Chennai, have been extremely supportive and cooperative in bringing the project to fruition.

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The Palgrave Handbook of Political Elites: Introduction

Heinrich Best and John Higley

In view of a hundred-year-long discussion of political elites and the cascade of references to them today in academic and public discussion, it is astounding that investigations of political elites have not previously been incorporated and assessed in a handbook. The strong positive and negative value connotations that attach to political elites and the central roles these connotations have in the language of contemporary political combat are additional incentives to take stock of facts and theories about political elites. This handbook summarizes both common ground and contested issues in the literature on political elites.

When Robert Putnam published his *Comparative Study of Political Elites* 40 years ago (Putnam 1976), that literature was already large. Putnam surveyed some 600 books, articles, and documents that had appeared in English since Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, and Robert Michels published pioneering works about political elites early in the twentieth century. In cogent chapters, Putnam distilled the extant literature's main topics and gave a good sense of its breadth: the inevitability of political elites, interactions between them and wider social structures, processes of political

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elite recruitment, sources of elite motives and beliefs, different structures of political elites, elite-mass linkages, and how political elites are gradually or suddenly transformed.

At the time of Putnam's book, scholars studying political elites were embroiled in arguments with Marxists about which conceptual approach to politics, an elite-centered or a class-centered one, had greater explanatory value. Neo-Marxism was in vogue, and scholars who focused on elites during the 1970s remember the brickbats hurled regularly at them by neo-Marxists. The chasm between the two approaches seemed no less deep than when Mosca, Pareto, and Michels first posed the study of elites as an alternative and antidote to Marxism. During the 1970s, moreover, the chasm was a scholarly manifestation of the global conflict between liberal capitalism and state socialism. Amid oil shocks and economic stagflation; authoritarian rule in much of the world; upheavals in Iran, China, and Poland; as well as terrorist actions by "revolutionary" groups such as the *Brigate Rosse*, Red Army Faction, and Weather Underground, the 1970s were a decade of tumult and uncertainty. It was by no means clear how the scholarly conflict between elite-centered and class-centered approaches would play out. Although Putnam's benchmark book did much to move the study of political elites toward the scholarly mainstream, it remained a relatively specialized undertaking and, in neo-Marxist eyes, a blinkered one.

During the four decades since Putnam's book appeared, world political configurations and scholarly discourse have been turned upside down, so that political elite studies, not class analyses, are now in vogue. This change has been associated with three global developments. One was the third wave of democratization, which began to flow almost exactly when Putnam's book went to press. Although the third wave spawned a vast and conflicted research literature, political elites and their roles in democratic transitions and consolidations were at its center. Indeed, much of the debate about democratization boiled down to whether the third wave was driven mainly by elites or by mass yearnings for democracy (Huntington 1991; Higley and Gunther 1992; Diamond 1999; Collier 2000).

The inability of political elites in state socialist countries to reform their economic and political systems and avoid system collapse was a second, closely related development. Failures of state socialist elites to enact system-saving reforms and intricate elite negotiations to spawn fledgling democratic regimes did much to bring studies of political elites to the fore (Kotz and Weir 1997; Mawdsley and White 2000). The global financial crisis that began in 2008 and its protracted economic and political consequences have been the third main development. The extent to which actions and inactions by political and

business elites caused the crisis and made recovery from it so halting have been key issues (e.g. Blinder 2013; Wolf 2014; Best and Higley 2014). The rise of nationalist-populist elites mobilizing crisis-rooted discontents among wide swaths of voters is another important issue.

As a consequence of these developments (and, of course, others), books and articles about political elites pour forth, and references to them are ubiquitous in scholarly and public discourse. Today, a Putnam-like survey of relevant literature would have to be several magnitudes larger than his was four decades ago. There is barely a political elite in the world that has not by now been the subject of at least one study, and political elites in most countries have been studied multiple times from numerous angles. Causal connections between political elites and a wide variety of social and political phenomena are now routinely asserted.

Directions in Political Elite Studies

On the axiomatic basis of the early elite theorists' postulate about the inevitability of political elites and the overwhelming body of historical and empirical evidence that supports the postulate, political elites must be viewed as a universal feature of all at least moderately developed societies. Following fundamental shakeups of political and social orders, political elites inevitably form anew, and in processes of renewal or transformation, they display an enormous variety of structural manifestations and adaptations to societal changes. The specific characteristics of political elites are related systematically to their performance and of societies over which they preside.

Political elites are defined in this handbook as *individuals and small, relatively cohesive, and stable groups with disproportionate power to affect national and supranational political outcomes on a continuing basis*. They consist of several thousand persons in all but the tiniest of modern societies. Political elite members hold top positions in large or otherwise pivotal organizations, institutions, and social movements, and they participate in or directly influence political decision-making. Political elites include the familiar "power elite" triumvirate of top business, government executive, and military leaders (Mills 1956) along with persons and groups holding strategic positions in political parties and parliaments, major interest organizations and professional associations, important media enterprises and trade unions, and religious and other hierarchically structured institutions powerful enough to affect political decisions.

This definition of political elites, or one very close to it, is now standard in the literature, although scholars use different methods to identify "proximate decision makers," as Putnam termed them (1976, p. 11). Some scholars and observers have much larger aggregations of influential persons and groups in mind when they refer to elites (e.g. Collier 2000, pp. 17–19; Murray 2012, pp. 17–20), but in most studies, political elites at national and supranational decision-making levels are treated as numbering only a few thousand persons. For example, a series of systematic studies of the US political elite since Putnam's book appeared have identified about 6000 individuals holding roughly 7000 top positions in institutions and organizations that together control more than half of America's total resources (Dye 1976–2014; see also Lindsay 2014). To give another example, the polycentric political elite presiding over the European Union and Euro Zone is estimated to consist of 600–650 persons, many of whom simultaneously hold top decision-making positions in their home countries (Cotta 2014).

Analyzing the backgrounds and demographic profiles of political elite members—their family and class origins, ages and genders, educations and careers as well as their religious, ethnic, regional, and other affiliations—long constituted the dominant approach to studying political elites. This was in no small part because public biographical and other documentary sources were readily available for analysis. During the past 40 years, however, scholars have availed themselves of computers, statistical techniques, and many advances in communications to undertake survey studies of political elite attitudes, interpersonal networks, and participation in decision-making. These surveys have largely displaced the earlier analysis of elite members' biographies. Research on political elites has become much more multidimensional and focused on what elites do than on where they come from (Higley 2016). Consider, for example, the several comparative surveys of political elites in European countries that have been conducted in recent years (Best et al. 2012).

Recent studies cast doubt on the accuracy and utility of earlier models of political elite structure and behavior, which derived mainly from analyses of elite biographies. The debate between adherents of pluralist, power elite, and ruling class models generated much heat during the 1960s and 1970s, but that debate has cooled, because the rich data stemming from survey studies show that elite structures and behaviors are more complex and multifaceted than earlier models depicted. However, there is as yet no clear replacement for earlier models. Contemporary theorists of political elites do not agree about elite structures and behavioral dynamics and how they vary from one country to another or from one historical period to another in a particular society.

This is to say that theorizing has not kept pace with the collection of more diversified and rich empirical data about political elites. There is no general and accepted theory that drives studies today, and its absence is a main challenge. There is, for example, no widely accepted typology of political elites that would inform a theory positing causal relations between changes in elite types and changes in political regimes or in institutional effectiveness. These and other unresolved issues are refrains in this handbook.

The Handbook's Structure

In early 2015, the Research Committee on Political Elites of the International Political Science Association invited several dozen specialists on political elites to contribute chapters summarizing and assessing recent conceptual and empirical advances in their areas of expertise. Organized in six sections, the handbook's 40 chapters contributed by these scholars illustrate the field's diversity and richness, its achievements, and its shortcomings. Chapters build on studies of political elites that have accumulated, showing how they illuminate a wide range of political phenomena. The handbook has been co-edited by a half dozen prominent analysts of political elites who have played leading roles in the Research Committee. It would be wrong, however, to regard the handbook as summarizing studies conducted or sponsored by the Committee. The volume contains a much wider array of scholarship about political elites that will, we hope, stand as a lasting contribution to this important area of social science.

The handbook opens with a section devoted to old and new theories concerning political elites, with its chapters highlighting both continuity and innovation. The handbook's second section describes and discusses methodological techniques and instruments devised for identifying and studying political elites. Its third section canvasses patterns of traditional political elites and those today in the world's major regions: sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, Latin America, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the West, with special chapters on Chinese and post-Soviet Russian political elites. The fourth section discusses attributes of political elites in the main sectors and institutional settings of modern societies—the executive, parliament, the economy, media, for example—and how these fundamentally differentiated elite groups relate to each other. The penultimate fifth section explores characteristics and resources of political elites vis-à-vis mass populations, while the sixth and final section dissects challenges that political elites confront today. Each section begins with an introduction by its editor(s) that gives an overview of themes elaborated in the section chapters. With an extensive

bibliography, the handbook provides readers with a comprehensive stocktaking of what is known about political elites and their consequences for politics and society.

It is important to emphasize, in conclusion, that the statuses and situations of political elites are always precarious and subject to internal conflicts and external pressures that threaten elite persistence. The ways in which elites cope or fail to cope with this precariousness are kaleidoscopic. The handbook seeks to cover their main dimensions and manifestations.

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Section I

Theories of Political Elites

Jan Pakulski

2

The Development of Elite Theory

Jan Pakulski

The body of thought known as elite theory has deep historical roots.[1] Embedded in the intellectual legacies of Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes, first systematic formulations of the theory were produced by a critical and skeptical generation of European liberals—principally Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca, Robert Michels, Max Weber, Joseph Schumpeter, and José Ortega y Gasset—all of whom wrote between the 1890s and 1940s. The theory's trademarks are a focus on elites as principal political and social actors, a conceptual pairing of elites and non-elites, and, most important, a political and methodological realism combined with an anti-utopian view of what is not possible politically and socially in all organized (at least somewhat developed) societies.

In all such societies, a bureaucratization of power facilitates domination by political elites that consist of top politicians, heads of state agencies, business tycoons and managers, leaders of organized labor, media moguls, and leaders of consequential mass movements. These networks of powerful individuals and tiny groups control the major decisional centers in modern societies. Elites mobilize the populations over which they preside for various causes and measures. Effective governance depends upon talented and skilled leaders imbued with political will, confidence, and foresight. Elite theory concentrates on the extent to which elites are endowed with these qualities and on

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shortcomings that produce political decay and lead to replacements by new elites better endowed with such qualities. In these and other respects, elite theory staunchly opposes Marxist and other strands of radical political and social thought.

The early exponents of elite theory attacked the promised advent of egalitarian and fully democratic societies as an illusion and an ideological pipe dream. They extended this attack to ideal renditions of Enlightenment beliefs, portraying them as illusions, myths, and deceptions. The development of modern societies, the early elite theorists argued, hardly bore out beliefs about linear progress and the triumph of reason. Instead, periods of relative order and stability are followed, more or less inexorably, by periods of disorder and conflict, and the rule of reason is at most fragile and patchy. Especially in an era of mass politics, political behavior is driven mainly by the hopes and fears of populations that lend themselves to manipulations by demagogues. Social hierarchy is a strong barrier to egalitarian reforms and leveling revolutions, while democracy in its representative form works primarily to sustain competitive governing elites. However, such elite democracies are fragile and unstable. Cunning and vulpine political leaders allied with business speculators gradually dissipate authority and exhaust a society's wealth. This leads to a crisis in which more resolute and authoritarian leonine elites take over. They also decay—lose their ruling capacities—thus triggering crises and causing their own downfall. Such cycles of elite ascendancy and decay are observed in all known large-scale societies.

The early elite theorists had as their targets Marxist-socialist visions of a wholly egalitarian society and radical visions of a pure (direct) democracy. They held these visions to be delusions that were both deceptive and dangerous. Because there is no recorded case in history of a wholly egalitarian society, Marxist visions are deceptive. Because they erode the legitimacy of a liberal political and social order, visions of pure elite-less democracy are dangerous. The pursuit of a classless society or a pure democracy is therefore both futile and risky. Moreover, the early theorists added, utopian egalitarian and democratic visions pose formidable obstacles to the development of an objective and realistic social science. Yet such a social science, grounded in historical-empirical evidence, is the foundation on which a workable politics must be built.

This critical diagnosis was the basis for elite theory's tenets about the cyclical degeneration and regeneration of elites (Pareto and Mosca) and the charismatic mobilization of mass populations (Weber), as Jan Pakulski points out in Chap. 3. They also form a background for a democratic method for selecting and constraining state leaders and elites through competitive elections

(Schumpeter). Concentrations of power and elite rule are not only constant and ubiquitous in history; they are all the more conspicuous in conditions of omnipresent bureaucratic organization, regulatory states, and mass media used as a tool for shaping public opinion. Yet in some circumstances the existence of elites can be compatible with important degrees of individual freedom and dignity secured through legal-rational authority (Weber) or through a system of "juridical defense" (Mosca).

These and other tenets of elite theory have been subjects of theoretical debates canvassed by John Higley in Chap. 4 and Andras Körösényi in Chap. 5. Although the early elite theorists, especially Pareto, denounced democracy as fraudulent "poppycock,"[2] Weber and Schumpeter worked to effect a theoretical reconciliation between the existence of elites and democracy's practical workings. They stressed that democracy never amounts to "people's power" in a literal sense. Nevertheless, as a regime type involving open and regular electoral competitions for leadership, democracy dignifies voters by rendering them "king-makers" ("authorizers" of leaders) and occasional deposers of incompetent "kings." And although such democracy cannot ensure political and social equality in other than a legal sense, it can in auspicious circumstances produce the stable political order that is a precondition of individual freedom and dignity.

But while these outcomes are possible, they are by no means certain—an important point at the beginning of the twentieth century. The early theorists agreed that neither elite nor mass conditions in Europe during the decades surrounding World War I were conducive to stable political orders. They instead anticipated, in Weber's striking phrase, a "polar night of icy darkness and severity." This would entail plebiscitary rule and "Caesarist" mobilizations of mass publics, the collapse of vulpine elites and their replacement by leonine ones, the decline of judicially protected liberties, the perpetuation of oligarchy, and rule by mediocre populist demagogues.

The elite theorists were proven right, but their predictive success did not translate into an acceptance of elite theory. During the "Age of Extremes," as historian Eric Hobsbawm (1994) labeled the "short twentieth century" between 1914 and 1991, utopian visions were ascendant. Marxist class analyses and conceptions of participatory democracy offered more alluring visions and dominated political and intellectual discourse. Both of these utopian streams of thought propagated hostile and distorted renditions of elite theory. Marxists portrayed elite theorists as bourgeois ideologues and reactionary cynics whose thesis about the inevitability of elites was nothing more than an apology for the unsavory *status quo*. Enthusiasts of participatory democracy painted elite theory as anti-democratic and authoritarian in thrust. These

characterizations contributed to the theory's lengthy eclipse, even though scholars such as Robert Dahl, C. Wright Mills, Suzanne Keller, Giovanni Sartori, and G. Lowell Field and John Higley tried to re-state and re-assert an elite-centered interpretation of politics and society.[3]

In light of these and other ideological reasons for elite theory's eclipse, it is hardly surprising that its revival during the twentieth century's final decade or two coincided with Marxism's loss of credibility, the collapse of Soviet socialism, and the inability of radical democrats to extend participatory democracy beyond tiny and isolated communities. The century's closing decades were also marked by the obviously central roles that leaders and elites played in forming the European Monetary System, re-orienting socialist China toward a market economy, dismantling the Soviet Union, and undertaking top-down democratizations of Central East European countries when the Soviet Union collapsed.[4] These developments highlighted the relevance and utility of an elite-centered perspective and theories grounded in it.

Elite theory has undergone important modifications. First, concepts of elites and non-elites have been made clearer, more operational, and more value-neutral. Contemporary conceptions of political elites define them as networks of individuals and small, relatively cohesive, and stable groups with major decisional power. Political elite members are today typically conceived at the national level as incumbents of top executive positions in the largest and most resource-rich organizations and movements. They are identified through combinations of positional, reputational, and sociometric research methods.[5] These methods produce a spectrum of delineations in contemporary societies that range from elites numbering a few thousand persons to elites defined as the top one or two percent of wealth holders. Accompanying these delineations is a widening recognition of internal elite stratification involving central or inner circles that consist of the most pivotal elite persons and groups, but also involving a somewhat lower stratum of influential persons and groups from which the most pivotal elite members are usually drawn. The concept of non-elites has been disaggregated into different and distinct population segments and strata, such as the agricultural-artisan, manual-industrial, and non-manual white-collar components of workforces, or into "insiders" who are securely employed and "outsiders" for whose labor there is no pressing need.

Second, elite theory's principal tenets have been streamlined to hold that (1) in all larger societies and especially in complex modern nation-states, power is concentrated at the top of organizational hierarchies in the hands of elites; (2) power in all such societies flows predominantly in a top-down direction from elites to non-elites; and (3) in all larger societies the characteristics and