

Title:

Elites and Leaders in Contemporary Politics

Presenter:

Jan Pakulski, MA (Warsaw), PhD (ANU), is Professor Emeritus at the University of Tasmania, Australia, Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, and Affiliate of the Stanford Centre on Poverty and Inequality.

Course description

The course is designed for advanced (postgraduate) students. It introduces an elite-centered theoretical perspective, an ‘analytic toolbox’ for power/elite research and a theoretical model of elite politics. It also provides a guide for the application of this perspective, concepts and theory in social research on, and analysis of, social developments, contemporary politics and international relations. The course covers mainly the 20th and 21st century developments in advanced democracies. Students examine critically the application of elite perspective in contemporary political analysis and research. They are expected to apply the elite perspective in their own analyses and research projects.

Course content:**1 Introduction: Power, Elites, Leaders and politics**

The focus, objectives and the format of the course are presented. The key concepts of power, elites, leaders and politics are discussed in the context of the elite paradigm and classical and contemporary elite theories, as well as contemporary debates about major pattern and causes of political change.

2 Historical change in political elites and leadership groups are presented and discussed in the context of the European Great Transformation (the intellectual, demographic, industrial-economic, political) and the formation of the modern constitutional state, as well as the key aspects of democratization and bureaucratization. Classical and

3 The emergence of elite perspective and elite theory

‘Elite perspective’ (or ‘elitism’) – a meta-theoretical standpoint that focus on top national decision-makers and power-holders, the elites, seen as the key social actors and agents of social and political change – formed at the turn of the 20th century. It depicts elites as an inevitable feature of all organised societies, and as dominant in both democratic and non-democratic polities. The classical elite theorists include Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca, Robert Michels, Max Weber, Joseph Schumpeter and José Ortega y Gasset. Elite theory explains variations in elite-mass relationships, elite recruitment, composition, type, structure, orientations and dynamics on the one hand, and important political outcomes on the other.

4 Contemporary elite theory and its main rivals

Theoretical and political rivalry in the 20th century involves Marxism and the s.c. “democratic theory”, a theoretical-normative construct attached to modernization theory. Marxism and elitism remained the major theoretical competitors throughout the 20th century. They have always pointed toward starkly different - one may say mutually incompatible and fundamentally opposed - theories of political and social change. In the Marxist paradigm, class membership influences all aspects of social and political life, with class divisions articulating themselves in social disparities, as well as political

allegiances and conflicts. Arising from fundamental economic relationships, classes are the principal actors on history's stage. This explanatory focus is supplemented by an attractive vision that sees class conflicts as moving history toward a classless end point. In the elite paradigm, by contrast, tiny but powerful minorities constitute autonomous social and political actors who are interested primarily in maintaining and enhancing their power. As for eschatology, the Marxist classless society is replaced by a somber projection of continuous elite circulation and power struggles.

5 Contemporary elite theory.

Elite theory and research, especially the more recent research on the relationship between the key characteristics of national elites, such as their structure, integration and consensus, and the major political outcomes, inspires numerous critical analyses of elite transformations that precipitated the post-WWII 'halcyon years' of stability and growth in Europe and North America, the liberal-democratic transformations in post-communist Europe, as well as the more recent turbulences in the Middle East and the current economic slowdown in Europe.

6 New trends: toward leader democracy

For the last c.50 years, we observe in almost all advanced democracies an ever more pronounced 'leader-centric' trend. This increasing leader-centeredness is detectable in both parliamentary and presidential systems. It is reflected in the centralisation of authority in leaders' hands; in more firm, often unilateral, actions taken by leaders (and applauded by the mass publics); in a widening media exposure given to leaders, especially in election campaigns; in the proliferation of 'leader parties', and in the mass expectation and approval of 'firm leadership'. All these developments – attributed to the party-voter dealignment, mass mediation of politics and the ascendancy of strong leaders-reformists – reinforce each other and change the physiognomy of contemporary liberal democracies by moving them toward 'leader democracy'. It refers to a type of mass democracy in which the central role in generating mass confidence, in integrating political elites, and in cultivating the link between political elites and the masses, is played by political leaders who regularly compete for electoral mandate-authorisation.

7 Political crises and populism

Political leadership in modern societies are periodically affected by populist waves. Populism refers to a specific style of campaigning and ruling characterized by anti-elitism, claims of representing "ordinary people" or "true" nationals, demagogic argumentation and vote-buying promises, and advocacy of "quick-n-easy" solutions. Populism affects polarization within elites and exclusion of "enemies-competitors".

8 National and trans-national elites – the EU project and its problems.

The concept of 'global/transnational elite'. The advocates argue that globalization coincides with the emergence of a new 'global' or 'transnational' elite 'without a country', that is, a new 'power actor' no longer anchored within national power structures of nation-states. These arguments reverberate in relation to new 'Eurocracy'. The current wave of globalization does not necessarily weaken the major nation states, but it definitely increases interdependence among these states, thus forcing national elites into widened, more intense and more regular contacts, cooperation and competition. In order to reduce major risks, elite groups contact and consult each other more widely and more regularly. They coordinate their steps, form alliances, build protective political cartels and cooperate in executing policies.

9 Summary. Persisting confusions and misconceptions

In spite of its long history, elite perspective, theorizing and elite research face a number of confusions. However, the recent crises accompanied by the resurgence of “leader-centric” trends and populism coincide with the resurgence of elite theorising and elite-centered studies of politics.

Course Readings are selected from the two main sources:

H. Best and J. Higley (eds), 2018, *Palgrave Handbook of Elites*, Palgrave.

J. Higley and M. Burton 2006, *Elite Foundations of Liberal Democracy*, Rowman and Littlefield.

Unit format:

Nine 3-hour (3x45 min.) workshop-like sessions, each including a short lecture, followed by Q&A sessions, discussions and exercises.

Intended learning outcomes

On completion of this unit, the students should be able to:

1. understand and apply the elite perspective;
2. understand and apply the key concepts and theories;
3. use/apply the elite perspective, concepts and theories to explain contemporary social-political developments covered by the unit; and
4. communicate their ideas in English in written and verbal form.

These intended learning outcomes guide the assessment for this unit.

Generic postgraduate attributes expected of students

Knowledge—an in-depth knowledge of political sociology and political theory, the ability to apply that knowledge, and the skills for life long learning. Students will use a wide range of academic skills tested during the workshop discussions and assignments

Communication and discussion skills—an ability to communicate in English in a way that is clear and appropriate to the context. Learning in this area will be facilitated through workshop discussions and assignments

Problem-solving skills—an ability to use critical thinking when approaching different types of problems and issues. It also includes information literacy, problem-solving skills and research skills – all of them integral parts of the unit assessment.

Global perspective—a capacity to appreciate global issues and other cultural perspectives and world views. A global perspective will be facilitated through references to different contexts that impact upon social analysis.

Social responsibility—a capacity to act ethically, with integrity and social responsibility. Progress in this area will be facilitated by discussion of the key ethical problems, and the study of key ethical dilemmas.