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Q1(e)

Explain briefly the elite theory of democracy

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · PSIR GS 1 · 10 marks · Democracy: Classical and contemporary theories; different models of democracy

Democracy: Classical and contemporary theories; different models of democracy - representative, participatory and deliberative.

Core demand of the question

- State the elite theory of democracy against classical popular sovereignty
- Name **Mosca**, Pareto, **Michels**, then **Schumpeter** and Mills
- **Show the claim:** organised minorities rule; democracy is circulation or competition of elites
- Add a brief criticism

Revision summary

Elite theory claims that an organised minority always rules; democracy changes circulation, not the fact of minority rule.

Mosca, Pareto, and **Michels** supplied the classical Italian and organisational core, including the iron law of oligarchy.

Schumpeter redefined democracy as competition among elites for the vote rather than as the people willing the general will.

Mills described a more closed power elite; Dahl answered with polyarchy and plural minorities.

The democratic task is to keep elites plural, replaceable, and accountable rather than to pretend that nobody leads.

Introduction

Elite theory says that in every political society a minority organises and rules. Democracy does not abolish that fact. It changes how elites circulate, compete, and justify themselves. The theory is a cold reading of **Rousseau**'s people and of textbook majority rule.

Body**The classical Italian school**

Gaetano Mosca wrote of a ruling class that monopolises organisation and political formulae - the moral stories that make rule look rightful. **Vilfredo Pareto** spoke of the circulation of elites, lions and foxes, residues and derivations. History is the replacement of one minority by another, not the arrival of the people as such. **Robert Michels**, studying socialist parties, stated the iron law of oligarchy: organisation needs leaders; leaders become a caste. Even parties of equality grow oligarchic.

- **Their mood was often anti-democratic. The descriptive claim still bites:** parties and bureaucracies concentrate skill, and the many cannot govern day to day.

Democratic elite theory

Joseph Schumpeter redefined democracy as a method: competing elites bid for votes. **The voter chooses teams, not Rousseau's** general will. **Max Weber** had described party machines. **C. Wright Mills** pictured a more closed power elite of military, corporate, and political chiefs.

Robert Dahl answered with **polyarchy: multiple minorities in contest**. **Giovanni Sartori** took democracy as the least bad way to replace elites. The criticism is that civic education dies if voters are only consumers, and that **Gramsci's** hegemony can close competition. Indian dynastic parties and anti-incumbency show oligarchy and circulation together.

Flow diagram

Elite theory -> Mosca ruling class
Elite theory -> Pareto circulation
Elite theory -> Michels oligarchy
Elite theory -> Schumpeter competition
Schumpeter competition -> Democracy as method

Conclusion

Elite theory of democracy holds that organised minorities govern, and that democracy is the competition and circulation of those minorities under rules. **Mosca**, Pareto, and **Michels** stated the hard core. **Schumpeter** made it a definition of democracy. The task of a democratic theory is not to deny elites, but to keep them replaceable, plural, and publicly accountable.

Facts & figures

Michels

The iron law of oligarchy holds that organisation produces a leadership caste even in parties devoted to equality.

Schumpeter

Democracy is a method by which elites compete for the people's vote, not a regime in which the people decide issues directly.

Mosca

A ruling class uses organisation and political formulae to justify its monopoly of political control.