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Q5(b)

Discuss the importance of 'power elite' in democracy.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2016 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 marks · Politics and Society

Politics and Society: Sociological theories of power; Power elite, bureaucracy, pressure groups, and political parties; Nation, state, citizenship, democracy, civil society, ideology; Protest, agitation, social movements, collective action, revolution.

Core demand of the question

- Discuss the importance of 'power elite' in democracy
- Keep the discussion within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

- **Mills**: interlocking tops of corporation, military, and political directorate.

Important in democracy because votes may not decide strategic agendas.

Marx, **Weber**, and **Michels** are neighbouring accounts of ruling minorities.

Indian business, civil, and party summits are analogues, not copies.

Plural blocs and movements constrain but do not erase elite importance.

Introduction

C. Wright **Mills**'s power elite names the interlocking top of corporation, military, and political directorate. In a democracy this matters because formal votes can coexist with a concentrated command of big decisions.

Body**The claim**

- Democracy counts citizens. Strategic decisions about war, investment, and media may still sit in a small overlapping set.
- **Max Weber** already split class, status, and party, and feared bureaucratic and expert staffs beside the demos.
- **Karl Marx**'s ruling class is the ancestor; **Mills** stressed institutional seats, not only property in the abstract.

Importance in a democracy

- **Agenda setting**: what never becomes an election issue.
- Circulation among a few schools, boards, and postings, which looks like merit and works as closure.
- Robert **Michels**'s iron law of oligarchy in parties is a neighbouring warning.
- **Indian analogue**: business houses, higher civil and security staffs, and party high commands, not a carbon copy of 1950s America.

Limits

- Pluralists argue veto groups fragment power. Caste and regional blocs in India do constrain a single elite.
- Social movements and the vote still periodically disrupt elite unity.
- **Emile Durkheim**'s civic morals remain a counter-ideal of a wider membership.

Flow diagram

Power elite -> Corporation

Power elite -> Military security

Power elite -> Political directorate

Votes movements -> Constraint

Conclusion

The power elite is important in democracy as a theory of concentrated, interlocking command behind the ballot. **Mills**, **Marx**, and **Weber** explain why. It is not a proof that elections are empty; it is a warning about who sets the possible.

Facts & figures

Mills

The Power Elite: coincidence of command at the institutional summit.

Michels

Iron law of oligarchy: organisation tends to minority rule, including in democratic parties.

Weber party

Organised power can impose a world-view and staff the state beside the electorate.

Agenda setting

Power to keep issues off the ballot as a democratic problem.

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