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Q4(b)

What would you identify as the similarities and differences in the elite theories of Mosca, Michels and Pareto? Discuss their main/crucial issues

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · Sociology GS 1 · 20 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

- State Mosca's ruling class and **political formula**
- State Michels's **iron law of oligarchy**
- State Pareto's **circulation of elites** and residues
- **Compare similarities:** minority rule, anti-Marxist elite focus
- **Compare differences:** organisation, party sociology, psychology of residues
- **Identify crucial issues:** democracy, bureaucracy, change without revolution

Revision summary

- **Mosca:** an organised ruling class justified by a **political formula**.
- **Michels:** organisation produces oligarchy even in egalitarian parties.
- **Pareto:** elites circulate; lions and foxes name styles of rule.
- **Similarities:** minority power, scepticism toward literal popular rule and toward Marxian class monopoly of explanation.
- **Differences:** **political formula** versus party oligarchy versus psychological residues.
- **Crucial issues:** accountability, recruitment and whether democracy can discipline elites.

Introduction

Gaetano Mosca, Robert Michels and Vilfredo Pareto are the classical elite theorists. Writing against both simple democratic optimism and **Marx's** class dichotomy, they argued that every society is run by a minority. The examiner wants the similarities of that claim, the differences in how each explained it, and the crucial issues that still matter for parties, bureaucracies and Indian democracy.

Body

Three statements

Mosca, in *The Ruling Class*, held that a organised minority always dominates an unorganised majority. The rulers justify themselves with a **political formula**-a moral or legal story such as divine right, popular sovereignty, or merit. Recruitment may be relatively open or closed, but the fact of a ruling class remains.

Michels, in Political Parties, studied socialist organisations that preached equality. He derived the **iron law of oligarchy**: organisation requires specialised leaders, expertise and control of communication; the base cannot govern daily. Democracy inside large associations therefore tends to oligarchy. The party secretary becomes a new elite.

Pareto distinguished governing and non-governing elites and explained history as the **circulation of elites**. Using his language of residues, he contrasted "lions" (force, conservation) and "foxes" (cunning, combination). When a governing elite grows rigid or over-cunning, another elite replaces it. Psychology and the distribution of talents, not only property, drive the cycle.

Similarities and differences

All three reject the idea that the people rule in any literal sense. All treat elites as a necessary minority, and all are sceptical of Marxist reduction of politics to economic classes, even when they admit wealth matters. All see organisation, not only ownership, as a source of power.

- **They differ in mechanism. Mosca is the most political-sociological:** organisation plus formula. Michels is the organisational ironist of mass parties and unions, empirically closer to later bureaucracy studies. Pareto is the most psychological and cyclical, closer to a theory of character types and social equilibrium. Mosca allows a degree of renewal through a relatively open ruling class; Michels is bleaker about inner-party democracy; Pareto emphasises replacement rather than representation.

Crucial issues

The live issues are whether universal suffrage changes the fact of minority rule, whether bureaucracy (**Weber** sits nearby) is the modern elite form, and whether circulation can occur without revolution. C. Wright Mills's power elite and later Indian debates on the IAS, business houses and party high commands still speak this language. The democratic hope is not that elites vanish, but that they remain accountable, permeable and plural.

Flow diagram

Elite theory -> Mosca ruling class formula
Elite theory -> Michels iron law
Elite theory -> Pareto circulation lions foxes
Mosca ruling class formula -> Organised minority
Michels iron law -> Organised minority
Pareto circulation lions foxes -> Organised minority

Conclusion

Mosca, Michels and Pareto agree that a minority governs and that organisation beats the crowd. They differ on formula, oligarchy of parties, and psychological circulation. The crucial issue for democracy is not the disappearance of elites but their recruitment, division and public control.

Facts & figures

Political formula

Mosca's term for the legal or moral myth that makes minority rule appear legitimate.

Iron law of oligarchy

Michels's claim that complex organisation necessarily concentrates leadership.

Circulation of elites

Pareto's cycle in which governing minorities are replaced rather than abolished.

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