**Scholarly (Non)Engagment With Elite Theory: A Bibliometric Study**

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**Abstract**

With the rise of populism over the past decade, discussion of elites and political polarization has become ubiquitous in political discourse. Using the NLP-enhanced bibliometric review method and supervised machine learning technique, this study reviews journal articles that mention, discuss, or apply elite theory in leading political science journals from 1968 to 2022 and analyzes the evolving scholarly emphases and community building. The results show that, contrary to expectations, scholarly citations and engagement with elite theory have not increased dramatically over time. Among the 259 papers reviewed, topics are highly multi-disciplinary, including democratic governance, mass and electoral politics, development of civic society, political and economic development of developing countries, financialization, and globalization. The study then discusses why elite theory has been largely ignored by main-stream political science, public administration, and development studies scholars and argues why this is concerning, not only because elite theory could provide scholars with a useful toolkit for examining populism, but also because certain strands of elite theory have deeply impacted the ultranationalist populist movement that has coalesced around figures like Donald Trump, Ron De Santis and J.D Vance in the United States.  The study concludes by discussing the future development of elite theory and the need for more multi-disciplinary research and application.

**Keywords:** elite theory

# 1. Introduction

With the rise of populism over the past decade, discussion of ‘elites’ has become ubiquitous in political discourse. “Populism” is a highly ambiguous term if not essentially contested term that offers scholars an abundance of definitional difficulties (Canovan 1981, p. 301). However, the term entered scholarly usage with the meaning of not much more that “anti-elite” politics (Allcock 1971), and this remains central to scholarly understandings of the concept. As such, the concept of “the elite” is integral to any discussion of populism.

It is reasonable, then, to expect a piquing of interest in that scholarly tradition which is uniquely concerned with the question of elites – namely ‘elite theory’. This study combines a literature review of elite theory with an NLP-enhanced bibliometric review of mentions, discussions and/or applications of elite theory in leading political science journals to argue three points.

Firstly, contrary to expectations the increase in scholarly engagement with elite theory has been marginal. Secondly, a particular strand of elite theory has had an important influence on the world’s most prominent populist movement – that which has taken over the Republican Party since Donald Trump’s 2016 ascent to the presidency – has been most neglected of all by scholarship. Thirdly, that this aforementioned strand of elite theory constitutes a synthesis of elite theory and Marxism – which is to say that there is a marked influence of Marxist thought upon the so-called “right wing” of the Republican Party.

The unconventional structure of this study will be as follows. The first part is a literature review of elite theory. The second part will detail the bibliometric study process. The third part and final part will comprise a discussion of the findings of the bibliometric study in light of the foregoing literature review.

# 2. Elite Theory Literature Review

Elite theory emerged in late 19th and early 20th Century Italy with thinkers like Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto and Roberto Michels. It has since gone through several iterations, restatements and mutations up to the present day. These can be conceptualized as having developed in three waves. The first of these spanned from the 1880s to the 1920s. The second wave of elite theory spanned the 1940s until the 1960s. The third wave begins in the 1970s and continues until the present day.

## 2.1 First Wave

The first wave is sometimes referred to as the Classic Italian Elite Paradigm. It is principally composed of three Italian thinkers, Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto and Roberto Michels. Although some thinkers that antedate these are sometimes identified as elite theorists (for example, St. Simon (Hart 1964)), these thinkers are generally regarded as the first to clearly and explicitly formulate the central tenets of elite theory. Briefly, these are the axiom that organized minorities will always dominate disorganized majorities (Mosca 1939), the “iron law” that any mass seeking to organize itself will necessarily create organised minorities (Michels 1915), and that the downfall of an elite always entails its replacement by an elite-in-waiting (Pareto 1935).

The crux of Mosca’s argument is that an organised minority will always outmanoeuvre a disorganized majority. A minority organized acts as a unit while a disorganized majority merely act as so many individuals. Thus, in any given instance of confrontation, the organized minority outnumbers the discrete individuals making up the majority. This much is axiomatic, though – as C. Wright Mills observed – it does not appear to have ever occurred to Mosca that an organized majority was a possibility (1959b, pp. 203-4). So, in a liberal democracy, the exercise of elections is not a manifestation of the will of the People, but simply a mechanical response of the majority to the active will of the minority.

A student of Mosca, Michels endeavours to fill a lacuna in Mosca’s thought: the unaddressed question of organised majorities. Michels argues that the organisation of majorities occurs through mass organisations (if the inelegance of that phrase may be excused) like political parties and trade unions. These organisations require leadership, which is practically by definition an “organised minority”. For a number of reasons which will be outlined below, this leadership inevitably dominates the organisation – leading to what Michels terms the “iron law of oligarchy”.

Following Cassielli’s (1953, p. 781) astute analysis, Michels’ arguments for why organisations inevitably become oligarchical can be divided into two broad categories – the structural and the psychological.

It is for the structural arguments that Michels is best remembered. Although Michels does not use this terminology, his argument anticipates later formulations of the principal-agent problem. Michels states that mass organisations, practically by definition, have memberships that make regular and meaningful discourse amongst members about decisions impossible. This problem is compounded by the inordinately large number of decisions that have to be made. These two problems necessitate the creation of a leadership strata (i.e. an organised minority) within the organisation to handle the making and implementing of decisions. The aforementioned large number of decisions to be made, as well as the complexity of their implementation, require the professionalization of this organised minority. This professionalisation entails that the members of the organised minority be *experts,* that they devote the entirety of their professional energy and time to their leadership task and that they be renumerated financially in an appropriate manner. This professional, expert status lends the organised minority a degree of indispensability which gives them autonomy from the mass of the membership, whatever arrangements are made for their control.

These structural causes of oligarchy are reinforced by a number of psychological claims. Only a minority are both interested in and intellectually capable of being members of this professionalised strata of the mass organisation. Most feel both a need for leadership and a sense of gratitude when said leadership is forthcoming. All of this reinforces the autonomy of the leadership from mass control in ostensibly democratic organisations. Given what Michels has to say about the masses’ psychological craving for leadership, it may be argued that he sees the masses as complicit in their own domination by an organised minority. To some degree, the principals are psychologically driven to give autonomy to their agents by willingly seeing themselves as subordinates. What is more, so Michels argues, a long-standing leader or set of leaders are often viewed as indispensable by the majority of the membership.

The combined effect of these structural and psychological phenomena is that the members of the professionalised leadership form a separate identity from the bulk of the organisations’ membership and come to see themselves as entitled to their positions. Thus, the leadership becomes “conservative” (1915, p. 365) in the sense of having a commitment to preserving its own privileged position. Indeed, Michels goes further and argues that the leadership comes to regard their own offices as more important than the ideals and aims of the organisations which they lead. This then is Michels “iron law of oligarchy” (1915, p. 377), the structural and psychological dynamics of mass organisations are such that they inevitably come to be dominated by an elite, or in his more succinct formula: “who says organisation, says oligarchy”(1915, p. 401).

Pareto takes as his starting point a conception of human motivations. According to Pareto, human actions are “logical”[[1]](#footnote-1) if they are congruent with their real intentions. With this understanding in mind, Pareto deemed human action in general to be non-logical because it is driven by a series of unknown and unknowable drives he terms “instincts” and “sentiments”. These instincts and sentiments are not, according to Pareto, directly observable but may only be inferred by their outward manifestations, which Pareto terms “residues”. Of these, Pareto identifies six: combinations, persistent aggregates, sociability, activity, the integrity of the individual and sex. For our present purposes, the reader need only concern him/herself with the first two of these; combinations and persistent aggregates (henceforth, aggregates).

Combinations refers to the preference or need for innovation, change, calculation, cunning, manipulation and trickery. Aggregates refers to the preference or need for preservation, conservativism, tradition, force and confrontation. Note the kind of “yin-yang”-esque polarity between combinations and aggregates. Different residues (and therefore, presumably, different instincts and sentiments) are dominant in different individuals. Borrowing from Machiavelli, Pareto termed those with a preponderance of combinations, “foxes”, and those with a preponderance of aggregates, “lions”. The various rationalisations individuals provide for their actions Pareto termed “derivations”. By virtue of the fact that individuals believe and proclaim their actions to be driven by derivations - when in fact they are motivated by instincts and sentiments - leads Pareto to declare human beings to be essentially non-logical.

Pareto posits a cycle of alternating dominance of residues of foxes and lions at the elite level. Elites whose personalities are dominated by one set of residues (outward manifestations of instincts and sentiments) are only able to exercise power in ways congruent with those residues and create institutions reliant on these ways of exercising power. Over time the focus on methods of rule deriving from one set of residues leads to an imbalance, opening the way for an elite dominated by the other set of aggregates to rise to power. Thus, we are presented with a cyclical account of elite change, what Pareto termed the “plutocratic cycle”. To repeat the same in more concrete terms, we may imagine that a society is dominated by vulpine elites. In keeping with their proclivities, they rule by persuasion and manipulation, liberal democracy being a natural mode of expression for such elites. Such a mode of rule may be successful at first, but over time generates pathologies such as cynicism towards the machinations of the ruling foxes. This environment of conflict- averse manipulation creates the demand for a corrective, namely its mirror image in the form of leonine elites. These lions replace the previous lions and rule through force and intimidation. Over time such rule becomes stifling, calling forth the rise, once more, of vulpine non-ruling elites. Again, one is reminded of traditional Chinese accounts of cyclical change based on the interplay of Yin and Yang. One species from Pareto’s bestiary become the governing elite, while the other is consigned to non-governing status. Over time, the free reign of this elites’ instincts creates conditions that allow the non-governing elite to rise to power and trade places with the incumbent elites.

## 2.2 Second Wave

By the mid-twentieth century a second wave of elite theory emerged, centred in the United States. This wave can be divided into three distinct currents. All three attempted to synthesise elite theory with precisely those theoretical perspectives which the original Italian thinkers developed their ideas in contradistinction to. The first of these was an attempt to synthesise elite theory with (liberal) democratic theory. The second and third can both be characterised as attempts to synthesise elite theory with Marxist class analysis.

The synthesis of elite theory and democratic theory produced what Bachrach (1980) termed ‘democratic elitism’. Although this term encompassed , even in Bachrach’s original usage, what are more commonly refered to as ‘pluralists’like Dahl and Lindblom a more precise usage of the term would restrict its meaning to those thinkers who are directly influenced by and share some of the central premises of the earlier Italian elitists. Democratic elitism in this latter sense is best exemplified by Joseph Schumpeter.

Schumpeter’s theory is contained in a few chapters in the middle of his monumental *Socialism, Capitalism, and Democracy (1942).* In these, he proposes a definition of democracy “that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote” (2010, p. 241). This minimalist definition stands in contradistinction to liberal democracy understood as the expression of the will of the People through the mechanism of voting. Indeed, as was acknowledged in that chapter, Schumpeter rejected the very possibility of a meaningful will of the People. He deems the masses to be irrational and disinterested in forming their own coherent opinions on political matters. Instead, he claims that the popular will is always a “manufactured will” (2010, p. 235). In a passage strongly recalling Mosca and Michels, Schumpeter states that “collectives act almost exclusively by accepting leadership – this is the dominant mechanism of practically any collective action which is more than a reflex” (2010, p. 242). For the sake of the stability of democratic polities, the masses should therefore restrict themselves to the role of voting on leadership, and then accept their being led.

The second wave of elite theory also produced two rival attempts to synthesise elite theory with Marxism. The better known of these we have termed the power elite school’of C. Wright Mills after his work *The Power Elite*. *The Power Elite* paints a highly nuanced image of the structure of the elite in the United States. Mills proposes that the “power elite” are those who occupy positions of command in a society. It is the position which confers power on the individual. What these positions are in any given society is subject to the contingencies of that society. However, in the case of the United States these positions can be categorised into a triumvirate: the corporate, the military and the political. The first consists of the heads of “two or three hundred giant corporations” (1959, p.7). The second of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The third of what Mills calls the “political directorate” (1959, p. 225) i.e. the President and his cabinet.

The power elite school, unlike previous iterations of elite theory, distinguished rigorously between the concepts of ‘class’and ‘elites’. Classes, following the Marxist tradition, are thought of as strictly economic categories. Developing the earlier thought of the Italian elitists, elites are defined as the holders of power conferring institutional positions. Elites are held to be drawn disproportionately but not exclusively from the dominant class, i.e. the bourgeoisie. Exemplars of the power elite school include G. William Domhoff, E.E. Schatschneider, Tom Bottomore, and Kenneth Prewitt & Alan Stone.

Competing with the power elite school is the theory of managerialism produced by Trotskyist-cum-conservative thinker James Burnham. Although older than the power elite school, Burnham’s theory of managerialism is largely forgotten within academia. This theory also synthesized a Marxist class analysis of history with Mosca and Michels observations about the importance of organised minorities holding strategically important positions of power. However, *pace* the power elite school, Burnham held that the world’s dominant class was no longer the bourgeoisie or owners of capital, but the managers of capital.

In *The Managerial Revolution*, Burnham posits that, at the time of writing (the early 1940ies), the entire world was undergoing a revolutionary transition from a bourgeois order to a managerial one. By the “bourgeois class” Burnham meant more or less what Marxists mean by this term. The “managerial class” is a concept original to Burnham. By this he denotes a distinct class of technical experts needed for the operation of complex and complicated mass organisations. How does Burnham understand the managers to be displacing the bourgeoisie as the ruling class?

Burnham defines a “ruling class” as that group which has a “greater measure of control over access to instruments of production” (1941, p. 59). He supplements this with what he calls a “general historical law” (1941, p. 60) - in any given society those who receive the highest incomes are the dominant group. On the face of things, this appears Marxist, albeit with the managerial class usurping the proletariat’s revolutionary role. However, a close reading reveals that Burnham has synthesised Marxian class analysis with Michels’ elitism.

Burnham understands the ruling class to be that which *controls* capital, which is not necessarily the same class which owns capital. Where Michels only demonstrated his “iron law of oligarchy” as operating in mass parties, Burnham applies it to the mass corporation and the mass state. Burnham argues that for all of the same reasons that Michels argues the technically skilled administrators of mass parties become autonomous from party members, corporate management and the civil service become autonomous from their principals (shareholders and voters respectively). Burnham termed these two functional equivalents to Michels’ party oligarchs “managers-in-industry and “managers-in-government” respectively” (1941, p. 150). Burnham saw this divorce of ownership from control of capital as being accelerated by the public trade of shares in corporations. The dispersal of ownership across potentially thousands of disparate persons creates the organised minority (managers) vs disorganised majority (shareholders) dynamic identified by Mosca.

Burnham proposed that the Soviet Union[[2]](#footnote-2) has not and will not deliver on its promise of a proletarian society. Instead, he suggested that the maximal degree of proletarian control over the means of production was secured immediately after the October Revolution. Since then, said Burnham, the managerial class has quickly seized control of the means of production, to the point where the managerial revolution was ~~is~~ most advanced in the USSR. Burnham stated that the fascist revolutions have been alternative avenues to almost the same destination. Strikingly, he held that the managerial class has also largely seized control in the United States[[3]](#footnote-3), but that the progress of managerial dominance here has been slower. Burnham also made two predictions. It is the failure of these to materialise that perhaps contribute to Burnham’s subsequent marginalisation. The first is that National Socialist Germany would win the Second World War, while the second is that the United States would gradually develop into something resembling the totalitarian societies of Germany and the Soviet Union.

## 2.3 Third Wave

The third wave is comprised of two currents that both arose in the mid-1970s. The first, centered around John Higley developed the New Elite Paradigm (NEP). The NEP is a “restatement” of the Classic Italian Elite Paradigm. As such it represents a ‘direct’ or ‘pure’ successor to the original Italian paradigm, while expanding upon said paradigm. The primary innovation of the NEP is a taxonomy of regimes in terms of their elites greater or lesser degrees of unity. Regimes may be possessed of disunited elites. In such cases, they will take the form of chronically unstable liberal democracies or only somewhat more stable authoritarian states. United elites may take two forms, that of consensually united elites and that of ideologically united elites. The former generates stable liberal plutocracies and democracies, while the latter produces stable totalitarian states. The NEP further posits three pathways by which a consensual union of elites may be achieved; an anti-colonial struggle, an elite compact or a gradual convergence of elites.

The NEP holds that the relative stability of a society is predicated on the existence and extent of the unity of elite persons. The *dis*unity of elites, and consequently the instability of regimes, is held to be the historical norm. Regimes are considered by the NEP to be unstable “whenever government executive power is subject to irregular seizures, attempted seizures, or widely expected seizures by force” (Higley and Burton 1989, p. 20).”

The bulk of NEP theorising consists of two sets of ideal types. The first set concerns configurations of elite (dis)unity, while the second concerns pathways to that configuration which allows for stable liberal democracy.

In *Elite Foundations of Liberal Democracy* Higley and Burton offer three ideal types of elite (dis)unity; a disunited elite, a consensually united elite and an ideologically united elite. In the earlier work *Elitism* (1980)from Field and Higley, a fourth ideal type was put forward, the imperfectly united elite.

As has already been stated, the NEP views the disunity of elites as the normal state of affairs – both historically and contemporarily. The politics of disunited elites are chaotic. They are subject to frequent irregular seizures of power. Historically, this took the form of frequent, violent succession disputes in monarchies. In the context of modern regime types, disunited elites take the form of unstable liberal democracies and illiberal democracies, insecure authoritarian regimes, and states that frequently flip-flop between the two.

The two alternatives to disunited elites that produce stable polities are, according to the NEP, historical rarities. The consensual union of elites describes a situation where a decisive majority of elite actors come to an agreement to coexist peacefully and respect the “rules of the game” of succession, as it were. Such a consensual union allows for the existence of stable liberal oligarchies[[4]](#footnote-4) and liberal democracies, with the former evolving over time, as a rule, into the latter. The alternative to this is the ideological union of elites. This entails the imposition of a single ideological line upon all elite actors, usually by a single party or a strong man. This coercive kind of unity produces totalitarian societies. These societies are described as stable and durable, although Higley and Burton acknowledge that the collapse of most Marxist-Leninist states towards the end of the twentieth century casts doubt upon this.

The imperfectly united elites occupied a median point between disunited elites and consensually united elites. Field and Higley describe these as containing:

…a sizeable, conservative portion of national leaders who have the same kind of internal cohesion as that which binds a consensual unified elite. However, a less powerful portion of leaders, who usually profess highly egalitarian values and policies and who therefore are generally excluded by the others from real power, are not similarly able to assure other elite persons’ statuses. – 1980, p. 73

Imperfectly united elites are deemed to be “moderately compatible with liberal values” (Field and Higley 1980, p. 73) and as being less stable than consensually united elites but more stable than disunited elites. In a defence of the NEP, Higley, Burton and Field depicted these ideal types as constituting a spectrum, with consensually united elites occupying a median point between disunited and ideologically united elites. Perhaps the imperfectly united elite model was done away with as it disrupts the symmetry of this spectrum. Or perhaps it was felt to be redundant as it overlaps with one of the ideal types in the NEPs pathways to consensual union of elites.

Said pathways are three-fold: the settlement path, the colonial path, and the convergence path.

An elite settlement is a one-step process wherein a decisive majority of all elites come together and over a period of no more than a few years come to agree to mutual toleration and respect for each other’s core interests. Such a settlement entails little if any circulation of elites. To the extent that such a circulation does occur, it only effects the most prominent elite figures (e.g. heads of states and governments). The paradigmatic example of an elite settlement is the English settlement of 1688-9. Other examples include and the Spanish settlement of 1976-8. Such settlements usually, but not always entail the establishment of ~~to~~ a liberal democracy with a fairly restricted franchise (what the NEP terms a “liberal oligarchy” (Higley and Burton 2006, p. 18) before the franchise is gradually extended.

The colonial path involves a consensual union of elites coming about as a product of a nascent elites’ experience of colonialism. This is usually contingent upon the colonial power in question itself having a consensually united elite. The consensually union is affected either by the nascent elites being prepared for independence by the colonial power (for example, in the case of Australia or, more controversially, Malaysia) or as a product of the independence struggle (paradigmatic examples being America or India). Interestingly, the elites produced by struggle with the colonial power are often, as in the aforementioned examples, profoundly influenced by the theories and norms of said colonial elites. This is obviously no longer a realistic path today.

The third path, that of convergence, is a “two-step” process (Field, Higley, and Burton 1988, pp. 5-6). In the first step, a large part of the elite forms a consensual union, but a sizeable section of the elite – committed to egalitarian ideas – remains outside of the union. The result is a situation described above as an imperfectly united elite. According to this model, the egalitarian elites are strong enough to cause instability, while not being strong enough to either gain power by elections or by force. The result is that after a couple of decades the egalitarian elites a) see that their core interests are not threatened by the united elites, and/or b) grow weary of being excluded from power. This leads to the egalitarian elites moderating their claims and eventually joining the existing elite settlement, resulting in the completion of the consensual union of elites.

However, an elite consensus is reached, the NEP argues that such a consensus allows the interpenetration of networks between different elites. These networks of social and professional interaction were previously separated from each other by the mutual hostility of different elites. Once consensual union has been achieved, their interpenetration serves to cement this union. These networks are argued to be less dense than those proposed by the Millsians, but denser than those proposed by pluralists. NEP scholars have produced empirical work demonstrating the existence of these networks (e.g. Higley, Hoffmann-Lange, Kadushin and Moore 1991).

Finally, the NEP differs from most forms of elite theory in the degree of autonomy it assigns to non-elite actors. Contrary to the likes of Neema Parvini, who states boldly that meaningful political change can *only* come from elite actors (2022, p. 3), the NEP see the masses as a restraint on elite actors. Elites, regardless of the regime they rule, always need the support of non-elites. Elites are constrained by “the appeals that they must make for non-elite support” (Field and Higley 1980, p. 19) so that:

…the political arguments of elites must generally conform to the orientations and attitudes of the non-elites to whom they are addressed. … When elites fail to operate within these non-elite limits they risk losing their power and tenure. [But non-elites are only intermittently engaged in the political process]. Hence the detailed treatment of political questions is largely left to elite choice. – (Field and Higley 1980, p. 19)

The other current of the third wave took Burnham as their point of departure. This current, consisting of leading thinkers within the paleoconservative milieux like Sam Francis and Paul Gottfried defended, adapted and expanded the theory of managerialism. These thinkers distinguish post-war American liberalism from pre-war liberalism, and identify the latter as the “managerial ideology”. Despite the overt hostility of paleoconservatives towards Marxism, their concept of managerial ideology retains a strong Marxian imprint. As with bourgeois ideology, managerial ideology is an epiphenomenon of the material interests of the managerial class, and serves to instill a false consciousness in other classes.

The most systematic and detailed restatement of Burnham’s thesis is to be found in Francis’2016 posthumously published magnum opus *Leviathan and Its Enemies.*

Francis feels Burnham’s argument has been unfairly dismissed because his prediction that America would evolve into a totalitarian state failed to materialize. In his restatement, Francis distinguishes between “hard” managerial states (the Third Reich, the USSR, contemporary China) and “soft” managerial states (liberal democracies like the United States) (2016, p. 59). Employing Pareto’s theory of residues, Francis sees the former as a product of a managerial class dominated by leonine residues, while the latter are a product of a managerial class dominated by vulpine residues.

Francis goes on to defend the theory of the managerial revolution against neo-liberal, pluralist and Millsian criticisms. Of these, his reply to the Millsian criticism is the most interesting, and the most relevant to the present purposes. On Francis’ account, Mills attacks Burnham for equating indispensable functions with power. Francis retorts by observing that, in the case of managers, exercising their function necessarily entails exercising power. The neo-liberal critique is that Burnham’s thesis was disproven by the prominence of subsequent generations of entrepreneurs. Francis dismisses this argument much as one imagines Burnham would have. He insists that even in such cases, control eventually and inevitably passes from the hands of the entrepreneur-capitalist into the hands of managers. Francis gives the case of McDonald’s as a particularly dramatic example (2016, p.121-2). To understand Francis’ response to the pluralist critique – that the elites are not, *pace* Burnham, united – we must first examine Francis’ restatement of Burnham’s theory.

To do this, we must begin with Francis’ definition of an elite. Citing Meisel, he offers the following definition: “in order for a social group to constitute an elite it must be both unified and dominant. A group may be said to be unified if they act similarly with respect to their interests, and it may be said to be dominant if it is able to make its interests prevail over those of other groups most of the time” (2016, p. 72).

Despite his apparent anxiety to distance Burnham from his Marxist roots, a marked Marxian influence remains in Francis’ thought. The concept of “interest” plays a key role in the definition above. Francis rejects as “facile” the distinction between beliefs and values on the one hand, and material or political interests on the other hand. However, Francis immediately goes on to suggest that these ideas/values are means for securing unity (a Moscaean “political formula” although he does not use the term), unity being necessary for dominance and thus constituting an interest in itself. He therefore describes the interests of the managerial class/elite (he uses the two terms interchangeably) as “objective” (2016, p. 73-4). All of this has a distinctively Marxian hue. As with Marxist, and particularly Gramscian, thought two competing claims sit uncomfortably side by side in Francis’ mind. On the one hand, material interests and normative values are said to be mutually constitutive. On the other, normative values serve an instrumental value in securing material interests. As with Marxism, it is the latter conception which is dominant in Francis’ schema. In the case of Marxism, property relations (and thus material interests) are, in the last analysis, anterior to values. Similarly, Francis, despite his insistence that the distinction between beliefs and interests is “facile” cannot but make just such a distinction. What is more, when he asserts that values are the “repositories of past interests” (2016, p. 74) he makes the latter anterior to the former.

So, Francis rejects the pluralist critique on the basis that the managerial class is united by a common interest. Francis does not deny that there may be conflicts within the elite about how best to pursue their interests, but this “does not contradict [their] unity” (2016, p. 98). One may, however, accuse Francis of being circular in his argumentation on this point. Francis sees the chief interests of the managerial elite as being its continued existence.

Yet it is on this point that Francis makes his most original contribution to the theory of the managerial class. He argues that this chief shared interest is as being served by the ideology of post-war American liberalism. This egalitarian strain of social liberalism Francis is careful to distinguish from classical liberalism which, with its values of self-reliance and rugged individualism, Francis sees as an ideology of the bourgeoise. Instead, post-war liberalism’s concern for social justice functions to justify the existence of an expansive and intrusive state. The technical complexities of this liberalism’s redistributive programs of social justice for women, racial minorities and sexual minorities justify an ever more intrusive state. The activities of this state necessitate the existence of party and state functionaries with specialist skill sets. Thus, Francis sees post-war liberalism as a “managerial ideology” (2016, p. 56), in contrast to the bourgeois ideology of classical liberalism.

Thus, the managers’ unified interest in their continued existence produces a unity of values. This unity of values leads to a unity of action, without the need for any conspiracy to coordinate action. For example, interventionist regulatory policies produce burdens on business that managerial mass corporations can afford to shrug off, while being disproportionately onerous on bourgeois entrepreneurial enterprises.

Francis makes another addition to Burnham’s theory. Alongside the managers of the mass- party, industry and state, Francis adds the managers of the mass media – or in Francis’ terms the managers of “mass organizations of culture and communication” (2016, p. 7). Francis argues that these managers of public opinion function to propagate the ideology of managerialism.

More recently, the intellectual current known as Neoreaction, whose founder and most well-known exponent is Curtis Yarvin, took inspiration from paleoconservatives as well as the Classic Italian Elite Paradigm (particularly as presented by Burnham in his book *The Machiavellians*) to develop an innovative power analysis. Said analysis holds that elite positions are principally non-elected positions. These positions, like that of the civil service and the media, hem in and ultimately control holders of elected office. Amongst these, Yarvin contends that the media and academia are home to the most important elites. Yarvin, taking inspiration from Walter Lippmann, posits that since the media and academia shape public opinion, and public opinion decides who is elected to office in a liberal democracy, it is media and academic elites who are the most powerful.

Yarvin’s model begins with a discussion of what he calls caste in America. It should here be noted that, although Yarvin primarily discusses American politics, he regards the US to hold near total metapolitical hegemony globally. Therefore, according to Yarvin’s model, statements about America are as a rule generalizable to the rest of the world. Yarvin suggests that he uses the term “caste” rather than class to sidestep assumptions his presumed audience would have about the latter term. He defines a caste as “a social group with its own internal status system”(2007). Yarvin uses a combination of Hindu and ancient Greek terminology to construct his American caste system, namely; Brahmins, Optimates, Vaisyas, Dalits and Helots.

Brahmins and Optimates are the current and former ruling castes of America. Brahmins confer status by (perceived) intellectual excellence and public responsibility. Optimates confer status by heredity and “personal character” (2007). Dalits and Helots are the indigenous and immigrant lower castes. Dalits confer status by power, wealth and sexual appeal. Helots confer status by wealth and hard work. Vaisyas constitute a middle stratum who confer status by respectable employment, “successful family life” and “social participation”(2007).

Yarvin sees the transfer of power from Optimates to Brahmins as a product of Brahmins’ capacity to generate ideas which justify the transfer of power to themselves. He identifies such ideas with the political “left”. Through a comparison to drug addiction, Yarvin argues that new “leftist” ideas justify a transfer of power, which is psychologically pleasing to the recipients of said power. This generates a sub-conscious psychological need to generate new ideas which will transfer more power. The influence of Pareto’s doctrine of residues and derivations is palpable. This explains what Yarvin sees as the continual “leftward” drift of politics (2009). Borrowing from Orwell[[5]](#footnote-5), Yarvin terms the Democrat and Republican parties the “inner” and “outer” party respectively (2008). The inner party is the party of Brahmins while the outer party is the party of Optimates. Over time, as Brahmins generate ever newer power transferring ideas, the relative positions of the inner and outer party will shift vis-à-vis these new ideas. The inner party will always occupy the newer, more avant-garde positions, while the outer party will shift to occupy those older positions which they previously opposed – although those positions have been deprived of their power transferring utility by the emergence of the new positions. To give a concrete example, American establishment conservatives in 2007 came to occupy positions on homosexuality and race that 10 years earlier had been the preserve of Democrats, while the Democrats have come to view those positions they previously held as retrograde. It should be repeated that Yarvin sees this dynamic as not a product of conspiracy, but a kind of emergent behaviour driven by the psychological need for power for its own sake.

To this schema Yarvin adds his concept of the “iron polygon”(2007b). By this term Yarvin denotes those institutional positions that confer “real” power, or in Yarvin’s terms, “major” vertices of power. Yarvin distinguishes between major and minor vertices of power according to the degree to which they are insulated from the democratic process. The presidency may nominally confer a great deal of power, but it is constrained by its being an elected position. Why such insulation matters to Yarvin will become clear presently.

Yarvin identifies eight major indices of power:  “the press, the universities, the judiciary, the Fed and the banks, the “Hill” (congressional staff), the civil service proper, the NGOs and transnationals, the military, the Beltway bandits (defense and other contractors), and corporate holders of official monopolies (such as “intellectual property”)”(2007b). Of these the first two, the press and academia, are clearly the most important for Yarvin. This is because, says Yarvin drawing on Walter Lippmann (1922), in a democracy policy “depends on public opinion [so] whoever gives the public their information ultimately controls policy”(2007c).

It now becomes clear why Yarvin makes the distinction that he does between major and minor indices of power. Those positions that are subject to the electoral mechanism are ultimately subject to public opinion. Ergo, they are subject to the will of those who shape public opinion – universities and the press. Since Brahmins confer status according to intellect and public responsibility, the best of their number will congregate in professions that are perceived as reflecting intellect (academia) or public responsibility (the press). What is more, Yarvin pre-empts pluralist criticism by arguing that the leading institutions of the academy and press (symbolized by Harvard and the New York Times respectively) are so much in agreement that they resemble a unified “department of knowledge”(2007d). Yarvin argues this is so because of their Brahmin character. Their psychological need to experience power drives them to embrace the same novel “leftist” ideas, as described above. Thus CNN, the New York Times, MSNBC and the Ivy League Universities proceed in ideological lock step.

It is noteworthy that despite Yarvin’s identification with the Burnhamite strain of elite theory – and the similarities of his ideas to Francis’ are clear - his identification of elite status with institutional position and his distinction between elites and class/caste carries a strongly Millsian flavour. However, his identification of the elite with the media and academia (with a secondary position for the civil service) to the total exclusion of elected positions is a highly original contribution to elite theory.

Having thus conceptualized the development of elite theory, we will now turn to our bibliometric study.

# 3. Research methods

The overall research process of this study is shown in Fig.1. First, a literature search was conducted to gather the required articles to create the initial dataset. Second, the data were processed and visualized by R software. Third, bibliometric analysis was used to explore research topics and focus on elite theory.



Fig.1. Research steps

## 3.1. Data collection

This research utilizes bibliometric methods to review the previous literature. The bibliometric analysis utilizes sophisticated statistical and mathematical approaches to systematically evaluate the scientific contributions of publications (Kent Baker, Pandey, Kumar, & Haldar, 2020). It has been employed widely due to its improvements in depicting the development processes of research topics (Liu et al., 2022). The bibliometric outputs of articles are downloaded in the Comma-Separated Values (CSV) formats to facilitate analysis using the “Bibliometrix” package (Nayak, Bhattacharyya, & Krishnamoorthy, 2022). Publications related to the elite theory were collected from the SCOPUS database, which is one of the most comprehensive citation databases (Assad & Bouferguene, 2022). Initially, a set of key terms, author’s names, book title and synonyms for elite theory (e.g., “elite paradigm” and “elite school”) were adopted as search keywords. The language was restricted to “English” and only journal articles were collected.

The process of data collection was multi-staged. The initial round of data collection produced 8, 332 articles. We observed that a large number of these were articles that discussed “the elite” or “elites” but without specific reference to elite theory. We subsequently refined our list of search keywords twice, removing terms we found to be too vague, like “elite” (without some qualifier) or “managerial revolution”. In order to further screen out irrelevant results, we paired certain search keywords. For example, “Joseph Schumpeter” was paired with “democracy” and “democratic elitism”. This provided us with 823 articles. We then proceeded to go through these articles manually, removing those irrelevant to elite theory. This finally produced a list of 259 articles.

## 3.2. Bibliometric analysis

In order to examine the formal characteristics of elite theory domains, this study combines bibliometric analysis with data visualization tools (i.e., R and VOSviewer) (Araújo, Pereira Carneiro, & Palha, 2020). The 259 included publications were imported into the bibliometric analysis software R and VOSviewer, which were employed for the qualitative analysis. This study combined the bibliometric method with data visualization techniques and network analysis to investigate the general characteristics of articles related to elite theory. Specifically, the critical keywords, collaboration map, and topic evolution of the elite theory study were investigated through a supervised machine learning technique.

# 4. Results

## 4.1 Publication trends and global collaboration analysis

Fig.2 illustrates the publication trend of articles about elite theory from 1986 to 2022. Before 2005, the publication quantity was relatively fluctuating, with some years even showing no publications about Elite Theory. While starting from 2006, there was a notable surge in publications, demonstrating a fluctuating upward trend.



Fig.2. Publication trend

Fig.3 displays the global collaboration trend in the field of Elite Theory research. The thickness of the connecting lines in the network graph represents the degree of collaboration between countries. As depicted in Figure 3, the United States and the United Kingdom previously collaborated most closely on elite theory research.



Fig.3. Country cooperation

## 4.2 Keyword dynamics and topic analysis

To get further understanding of elite theory, Fig.4 depicts the hot topics in elite theory publications more precisely. Multiple correspondence analysis compresses extensive data with multiple variables into a low-dimensional space to form an intuitive two-dimensional graph that uses plane distance to reflect the similarity between the keywords. Keywords approaching the center point indicate that they have received close attention in recent years. Five clusters are identified in the multiple correspondence analysis. In the purple cluster, keywords such as “political elites”, “elite circulation”, “democratization”, and “aristocracy” have a strong association. As shown in the red cluster, keywords such as “social capital”, “hegemony”, “ideology”, and “populism” are strongly linked. In the green cluster, keywords such as “class”, “inequality”, and “neoliberalism” are salient. In the yellow cluster, keywords such as “financialization” and “accountability” show their importance. In the blue cluster, keywords such as “fascism”, “oligarchy”, “leadership”, and “Marxism” are prominent.



Fig.4. Multiple correspondence analysis of high-frequency keywords

In addition, this research also explored the trending topics in elite theory publications. Fig.5 reveals the topics that have been continuously studied since 2007. The blue circle represents keyword frequency. The straight line represents the duration of the keyword appearance. The topic “corporations” was a popular topic in the early years of elite theory articles. Then, in 2015, other topics such as “power elite” and “oligarchy” began to receive academic attention. Next, “democracy” and “corruption” appeared and continued to maintain scholars’ attention. Moreover, in recent years, topics such as “elitism”, “populism” and “neoliberalism” have been focal points.



Fig.5. Trending topics

# 5. Discussion

‘The elite’ and ‘elites’ are concepts that have gained much traction in the recent years in response to the rise of populism – not only in the West but in Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa, and South, Southeast and East Asia. Nourey and Rowland’s recent study has found a steep growth in scholarly literature on the subject since 2016 (2020).

Our study found that there has been a dramatic increase in publications on elite theory. However, despite the centrality of the elite/elites to populism and the aforementioned growth in scholarly interest in populism, our study finds that, contrary to what might be reasonably be expected, elite theory remains largely ignored. It is remarkable that a scholarly tradition with a long history and a rich theoretical toolkit for addressing the question of populism seems to be a rather neglected field.

In support of the above claims, our initial search produced a corpus of 8, 332 articles. Once we narrowed down our corpus to articles that specifically referenced elite theory our corpus consisted of 259 articles. Of the former corpus, 189 contained the keyword “populism”. Our refined corpus, on the other hand, contained only 5 articles with the keyword “populism”. What is more, these 5 articles were all published in the rather narrow timeframe of 2020 to 2021, indicating that what little has been written about populism has been written recently.

What is more, to the extent that elite theory is engaged with, this engagement seems decidedly lopsided. It is, for the most part, restricted to representatives of the first and parts of the second wave of elite theory (e.g. Mosca, Pareto, Michels, C.Wright Mills and Joseph Schumpeter). The branch of second wave elite theory represented by James Burnham seems to be entirely ignored, while secondary thinkers of the Power Elite School (e.g. G. William Domhoff) have barely made an impression.

The third wave of elite theory has been even more marginalized within scholarship, which is striking as it suggests that mainstream scholarship has failed to keep abrest of developments in elite theory since the 1960ies. For example, the NEP that John Higley and others have developed since the mid-1970ies represents perhaps the most significant and recent scholarly development within elite theory, and yet our study suggests that it has had a limited impact. Scholars representing the NEP like Higley and Michael Burton are amongst the most frequently cited in our 259 article corpus, and yet “New Elite Paradigm” does not appear among the “most used key terms” in our corpus, indicating that it is rarely referred to.

This neglect of elite theory is not only notable as it overlooks a valuable toolkit for analysing populism, but also an influence on the world’s most prominent populist movement. Paleoconservative and neoreactionary thought are not only profoundly influenced by elite theory, but constitute substantive elaborations and restatements of certain forms of elite theory. The Trump movement is profoundly influenced by paleoconservativism (Drolet & Williams 2019; Hawley 2017, p. 129; Sokolshchik 2021), while more recent Republican populist figures like JD Vance and Blake Masters have been directly linked to Yarvin (Pogue 2022; Prokop 2022). Yarvin’s influence might also be detected in Vivek Ramaswamy’s campaign pledges to dismantle federal agencies by executive order and to purge 75% of federal employees. It is therefore surprising that increased interest in populism, which our study shows is strongly America centric, has not translated to greater interest in elite theory. Our corpus contains two articles which discuss James Burnham (Murphy 2020 and McLaren 2011), no articles that refence paleoconservative Burnhamite theorists like Samuel Francis or Paul Gottfried, and only a single article which discusses neoreactionary elite theorists (Smith & Burrows 2021). This failure to engage with this particular dimension of American populist-nationalist thought, combined with the inattention given to the elite theory in general and certain branches of elite theory in particular suggests a specific, and worrying, blind spot within the academy. This blind spot in scholarly engagement with elite theory is illustrated in the diagram below.



As was demonstrated in the literature review, the elitist theory of paleoconservatives shows a marked Marxist influence – both in its acceptance of Burnham’s Marx-influenced class analysis and its characterization of post-war liberalism as a class ideology of the managerial class. The influence of these paleoconservative ideas is to be found within populist discourse about the “deep state” and “cultural Marxism”. The deep state is a concept of Turkish providence, but its content, the state beaurocracy of managers, recalls paleoconservative elitism. Indeed, the Trumpian itinerary of elites matches the paleoconservative list of managers – state, establishment parties, big business and the media. The notion of cultural Marxism as an ideological instrument of the elite intended to dissolve traditional morality echoes the paleoconservative characterization of post-war liberalism. It goes without saying that there should be an influence of Marxism upon the radical wing of the Republican Party is deeply ironic. Perhaps this fact suggests a reevaluation of Del Noce’s claims regarding the centrality of Marxism to the process of political modernity.

# 6. Conclusion

The central claim of this paper is that scholarship has under-engaged with elite theory. To the end of substantiating this claim, this paper consisted of two parts. The first offers an exhaustive literature review of elite theory. With this context, the second part provided a bibliometric overview of engagement with elite theory in leading political science journals. The bibliometric analysis revealed that, contrary to expectations, there has not been a significant increase in scholarly engagement with elite theory in recent years. What is more, the more recent developments (those of the second and particularly the third wave) are those which have been especially of interest. This is particularly striking as it is some of these second and third wave iterations of elite theory which have influenced American national populism.

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1. Pareto’s choice of term here is unfortunate. One would prefer to say rational rather than logical. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. At the time, one of only two communist states – although Burnham never mentions Mongolia. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Burnham is not alone in observing the similarities of the economic policies of, on the one hand, Roosevelt’s New Deal, and on the other, European fascism. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It should be noted that the distinction the NEP draws between liberal democracies and liberal oligarchies is in disagreement with the definition of liberal democracy offered in the previous chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. One would note here that Orwell was himself strongly influenced by Burnham. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)