

Gov 365N: Politics of New Democracies  
Second Mid-term, Take-Home Essay  
Due November 4, 2004

*How important are elites to democratization?*

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If political elites are defined as “those persons who have the organized capacity to make real political trouble” then how important are these political elites to democratization?<sup>1</sup> Through the course of this paper I will define and discuss the four major types of political elites and how transitions lead to consensual elites (the only form of elites that leads to a stable representative regime). I will also address the various arguments and problems posed to the elite paradigm and conclude that though elites are important in the democratization process, their place is not as important as some of the scholarship makes it to be!

Various scholars (Mosca, Pareto, Dahrendorf, and Putnam) have tried to identify the different configurations of political elites. Burton and Higley provide us with four basic subtypes of united and disunited political elites based on the extent of *differentiation* and *integration*. Differentiation is defined as “the process through which groups making up political elites become more numerous, organizationally diverse, functionally specialized and socially heterogeneous”; and integration is defined as the “structure and character of the elites’ internal relations.”<sup>2</sup> These four subtypes are: *Consensual elite*, who demonstrate strong integration, wide differentiation and an “ethos of restrained partisanship and a tamed politics”; *Ideocratic elite*, illustrate a strongly integrated but narrowly differentiated elite where a central party or movement controls the state; *Fragmented elite*, display weak integration, wide differentiation and “no underlying consensus on political game rules and codes” and *Divided elite*, exhibit weak

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Burton & John Higley, “The Study of Political Elite Transformations,” *International Review of Sociology*, Vol. 11, No.2 (2001), p. 182.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183-4.

integration, narrow differentiation and “there is no game-rule consensus or single belief system to restrain competitions.”<sup>3</sup>

According to Burton and Higley each type of political elite creates a unique regime type. Either the regime is *representative*, in which political elites have the “access to the organization, exercise, and transfer of government power” or *unrepresentative*, where “one elite faction or camp monopolizes access.”<sup>4</sup> They further classify regimes as *stable* or *unstable*, based upon recent attempts or expected attempts of illegally seizing executive power by force. A consensual elite creates a stable representative regime, in which elites compete for power, in a representative body, through elections. An ideocratic elite creates a stable unrepresentative regime, in which a single party monopolizes power and there is jockeying for power in the upper echelons of the party. A fragmented elite leads to an unstable representative regime, with power located in a representative body and the power is transferred between factions through elections. A divided elite creates an unstable unrepresentative regime in which power is concentrated in the hands of one group or family and where opponents are subdued.<sup>5</sup>

Consensually unified elite have strong integration; with various interconnections that defy factional and sectoral boundaries leading to freer access to “key decision-makers.”<sup>6</sup> There is wide differentiation among consensually unified elite and sectoral elites have substantial autonomy over their actions. This leads to a “rough elite consensus” about the rules of political behavior which results in “an ethos of restrained

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187-8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187-9.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

partisanship and a tamed politics.”<sup>7</sup> The elites see each other as legitimate actors in the political arena and there is greater cooperation to negotiate and resolve issues to avoid conflicts. Also, the consensual elite compete for electoral support to gain power in the representative body. Power isn’t usually seized from one faction or another, but transferred through elections. These traits of consensually unified elite supports democratic consolidation. But one ought to remember that there might be some irregularities that vary over time, which might undermine democratic consolidation.<sup>8</sup> A couple of those problems might be that participation in these elite elections might not be open to all citizens at all times; some manipulative tendencies might be prevalent too.

Consensually unified elites have emerged very rarely during the foundation of nation states. During the nation building stage they have either emerged when imperial colonies were given an opportunity to practice cooperative politics in ‘home-rule’ governments or during a protracted national independence struggle and more rarely to the development of isolated agrarian ‘citizen communities’. It may be noted that the emergence of a consensual elite during the foundational stage has resulted in a stable representative regime.<sup>9</sup>

Transformations from divided to consensual elite take the form of elite settlements, where we notice a sudden negotiated end to core disputes. This arises when there is a stale-mate situation with no chances of any side’s victory and there is a catalyst that threatens to prolong the dispute and make it more expensive. Also, the elites have to

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

be organized in a way, that there is interaction among key leaders and that they have enough freedom to make compromises that are required by the settlement.<sup>10</sup>

Transformations from fragmented to consensual elite might also take the form of elite settlements, but they usually involve elite convergence. This happens within the electoral process, when elites realize that by creating a broader coalition and mobilizing more votes they might be able to win elections repeatedly. This tends to lessen the conflicts among the fragmented elites and brings them closer.<sup>11</sup>

The literature on elite settlements claims that “the mode of transition influenced the resulting regime type.”<sup>12</sup> It was also theorized that democracy emerged as a result of a transition moment, when there was a balance of power between the authoritarian regime and supporters of democracy. And since neither side could achieve their first preference through use of force, they decide to negotiate a settlement, generally called a ‘*pact*’. But in doing so and institutionalizing these pacts in the new democracy a lot of other factors are neglected. Ideas, norms and beliefs didn’t hold a place in these transition theories, which gave rise to the notion that a country could become a “democracy without democrats.”<sup>13</sup> McFaul argues that such patterns are not obvious in the postcommunist world and that most postcommunist transitions did not result in democracy and neither did successful democratic transitions followed the above mentioned ‘*pact*’ path! Rather, it was the “*unequal* distribution of power” that produced the quickest and most stable

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193-4.

<sup>12</sup> Michael McFaul, “The Fourth Wave of Democracy *and* Dictatorship,” *World Politics*, Vol. 54 (January, 2002), p. 213.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

postcommunist transitions.<sup>14</sup> In an asymmetric balance of power, the ideology of the most powerful party triumphed! Thus democracy emerged only in places where democrats enjoyed a power advantage. Though McFaul endorses the actorcentric approaches, he questions “what causes pacts between moderate elites to materialize in the first place?”<sup>15</sup> He also suggests that the research should attempt to account for the factors that produce the different modes of transition in the first place. He concludes by suggesting that the “next generation of democratization theory must seek to specify more precisely the conditions under which pacts can facilitate democratization and the conditions under which pacts are inconsequential.”<sup>16</sup>

The elite paradigm is fraught with various problems. Consensual elites are defined to be a group that promote democracy; and democracy is understood to be promoted *only* by consensual elites in the elite paradigm. This is problematic as consensual elites and democracy are related to each other by definition, making the theory tautological! Another folly of this theory is its lack of generalizability. As Michael McFaul points out, there is a serious need to question the “relationship between mode of transition and resulting regime type,”<sup>17</sup> and make the elite paradigm more applicable to current standards. Some might find the elite paradigm quite pessimistic as it pins all hopes on a few elites and has no faith in the ability of the masses.

I do believe that elites hold an important place in the democratic transition, but through our discussion above, it should be clear that their position is overemphasized in the some of the scholarship that we have looked at.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.