Democratic Elitism

The Founding Myth of American Political Science

NATASHA PIANO

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A searing argument—and work of meticulous scholarship—about how American political scientists misinterpreted the elite theory of democracy and in so doing made our political system vulnerable to oligarchic takeover.

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Dedicated to my mother Lalla—in love, in gratitude,
but above all in friendship

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Contents

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Preface

Over the last twenty years the twin menaces of populism and demagoguery have plagued liberal democracies worldwide. Increasing economic inequality and marked plutocratic capture of political institutions have given rise to what many today call populism. The phenomenon is characterized by general citizen disillusionment with elections that result in plutocracy and legislative decisions that consistently reflect the interests of elite minorities over those of voting majorities. In short, populists complain that elections do not generate leaders who are representative of or even accountable to popular interests. The perceived lack of representativity and accountability has prompted demagogues to call into question the legitimacy of liberal democracies. These demagogic leaders often express the familiar refrain that their victories constitute "the voice of the people" or electoral mandates to do away with liberal norms and practices.

At the same time, both mainstream political science and contemporary political discourse continue to define democracy primarily by the presence of free and fair elections. For at least fifty years, political scientists of all stripes have criticized this operative "minimal" definition as insufficient, but no clear alternative has emerged to differentiate democratic regime types from authoritarian alternatives. This definition of democracy has come to be seen as especially unconvincing in an age of populist uprisings where demagogues have consistently won competitive elections and proceeded to systematically dismantle liberal democratic procedures in the process.

Some have argued that this "disfiguration of democracy" highlights our need for more representative, competitive elections—the foundation of democracy—to combat the infiltrations of technocracy into popular government.[1] Others have called for more direct, deliberative citizen participation in the spirit of

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Athenian politics refurbished for the internet age.[2] Still others demand plebeian constitutional measures that introduce new political institutions based on socioeconomic divisions to both minimize plutocratic capture of office and bolster ordinary citizen extra-electoral participation.[3] Yet the sheer quantity of proposed remedies raises a recurring question in the history of Western political thought: Are these plutocratic and demagogic threats simply bugs of current systems or inherent features of democracy itself?[4]

Is it possible that these twin threats are unintended consequences of defining democracy in terms of competitive elections? What if defining democracy as competitive elections actually breeds citizen disillusionment with liberal norms and procedures, thereby inviting demagogic usurpation?

The Italian School of Elitism—Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca, and Robert Michels—voiced this very suspicion. They worried that defining democracy through representative practices creates unrealistically democratic expectations of what elections, on their own, can achieve, resulting in their delegitimization. And yet these authors are a rather surprising resource for concerns about plutocratic capture, populist uprising, and demagogic usurpation. The conventional wisdom understands them as conservative, antidemocratic figures who championed the equation of democracy with representative practices in order to restrain popular participation in modern mass politics. It is generally taken for granted that Pareto, Mosca, and Michels are responsible for the hundred-year-old tradition called democratic elitism, or elite democratic theory, which identifies democracy as electoral alternation of office.

This book contends that those who interpret Pareto, Mosca, and Michels as "elite theorists" fundamentally distort their political thought and completely ignore their main objective: to contain plutocracy in the age of modern mass politics, partially by disassociating elections from democracy. Somehow Pareto's, Mosca's, and Michels's cynical views of elite domination and its perversion of the democratic process have become—in the hands of Carl Friedrich, Charles Merriam, James Burnham, Raymond Aron, C. Wright Mills, Seymour Martin Lipset, Robert Dahl, Peter Bachrach, Carole Pateman, Adam Przeworski, and others—celebrations of electoral competition and representative government. I aim to convince readers that we ought to think of Pareto, Mosca, and Michels, not as elite theorists of democracy, but instead as democratic theorists of elitism.

My alternative narrative questions whether we should continue to identify modern democracy as synonymous with free and fair elections. Reviving the Italian School's original contributions unearths a theory of democracy that might help us disassociate these two concepts in our political vocabulary. The

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point of this endeavor is not to eliminate elections from democratic theory. Rather, I maintain, deflating the democratic expectations of electoral politics can help restore the legitimacy of elections and actually revive their proper role in modern popular government.

Today, when the future of contemporary democracies appears murky, the definition of democracy as free and fair elections no longer maintains the clarity that it once promised. Retracing the genealogy of democratic elitism might not only purge us of old bad habits; it might also lead us to a fresh conception of modern democracy following the Italian tradition of *buon governo*—democracy as part and parcel of good government.

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Illic enim orta, illuc redit —Petrarch

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Introduction: The Lies We Tell Ourselves

An Intellectual History of Political Science

To explode a myth is accordingly not to deny the facts but to reallocate them. —Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*

Many readers will be familiar with *Pinocchio* (1940), the animated fantasy film of a puppet's attempts to become a real boy. After many tribulations, Pinocchio learns the virtues of honesty and moral rectitude through the guidance of his conscience, a cricket named Jiminy who narrates the tale. Across the globe, the Walt Disney production is known as a children's masterpiece and optimistic ode to the virtues of individual morality. It also, perhaps unsurprisingly, wildly distorts its literary source material, Carlo Collodi's celebrated *Pinocchio* (1881–1882). Collodi's novel is the quintessential *storia risorgimentale*—an allegory for the birth of the Italian nation.[1] Just ten years after formal unification, *Pinocchio* offered a prophetic warning to the adolescent *l'Italia*, which still had many growing pains to face and whose outcome was far from certain. In the original fable, the allegorical representation of the nation (Pinocchio), the Northern elite (Master Antonio), and the Southern masses (Geppetto) was readily apparent to an Italian audience.

The story begins in Tuscany, the part of the peninsula that is neither Turin nor the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies but that will furnish Italy with a unified language. There a carpenter named Master Antonio finds a block of wood that he plans to carve into a table leg. Frightened when the log cries out, he gives it

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to his wretchedly poor Southern neighbor Geppetto, nicknamed Polendina (Polenta) because his blonde wig recalled the yellow gruel of the cornfields. Rather than farming, Geppetto dreams of earning his living as a puppeteer and thus carves the log into a boy he named Pinocchio. It is as if from the very beginning the piece of wood yearned to be its own independent object with no interest in serving as an instrument to prop up something else. While the wood's cries panicked the master carpenter, Geppetto was willing to put the work into giving it life, just as the North's southern neighbor was ultimately more willing to put in the grueling preparatory work of revolution and unification throughout the nineteenth century.[2]

Before he is even built, Pinocchio has a mischievous nature. No sooner is Geppetto done carving Pinocchio's feet than the puppet kicks him. Once the puppet has been finished and Geppetto teaches him to walk, Pinocchio runs away into the town. He is caught by a police officer, who assumes Pinocchio has been mistreated by Geppetto, whom he imprisons, just as the South will be inappropriately blamed for its purported political depravity. Left alone, Pinocchio heads back home. After a series of trials that exhaust him, Pinocchio lies down on a stove; when he wakes, his feet have burned off. Fortunately, Geppetto is released from prison and makes Pinocchio a new pair of feet. In gratitude, Pinocchio promises to attend school, and Geppetto sells his only coat to buy him a schoolbook, only for Pinocchio to start ditching classes once he has started to make a modicum of progress. How quickly Pinocchio neglected Geppetto's earlier sacrifice, a sacrifice Geppetto had made in the hope that Pinocchio would acquire the education that Geppetto himself never received.

A long series of disasters ensue as Pinocchio indulges in deceitful behavior and gluttonous excess, most famously with his best friend, Lucignolo, or Candlewick. In the end, after a face-to-face reckoning with Geppetto inside a whale, Pinocchio and Geppetto escape together and Pinocchio gets a job as a farmhand. After Pinocchio has put in months of hard work supporting the ailing Geppetto, the Fairy with (Savoy) Turquois Hair makes good on her earlier promise and turns Pinocchio into a real boy, gifting him a new suit, boots, and a bag that contains forty gold coins. Pinocchio begins to prosper as he works to improve his circumstances. Even Geppetto miraculously regains his health.

Pinocchio's mischievous adventures represent the ways that Italian identity was formed through newly developed attachments, voluntary and otherwise, to the nascent nation.[3] Yet in the face of these trials, disasters in his identity formation ensue as Pinocchio continues to lie about his circumstances and

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capabilities in order to indulge in excesses that certainly do not correspond to his stage in life. In effect, the fable does not consist merely in a moralistic reprimand of Pinocchio's disobedience.[4] The problem is more that Pinocchio pretends to be something he is not: a wealthy adult spending his money on pastries, drugs, and the theater instead of attending school, which is more appropriate to the season of his life. Ultimately, excess and deceit are what turn both Pinocchio and Lucignolo into asses.

The most destructive lies are the ones Pinocchio tells himself. Early on, more than anything else, he is unwilling to hear that he is not yet a real boy. In the opening chapter the Talking Cricket pedantically reprimands Pinocchio: "You are a puppet and what's worse is that you have a head of wood!" This later becomes the refrain of the tale. In frustration, Pinocchio throws a mallet at the cricket, accidentally killing him. Throughout the narrative the Cricket periodically reappears as a ghost furiously reproaching Pinocchio to reform his ways and return home to attend school. Far from serving as his conscience, Pinocchio's talking critic was killed immediately, and many external interventions are required for Pinocchio to begin following the path toward reform.

This book tells the story of the Italian School of Elitism and its role in the Risorgimento and in the development of political science across the Atlantic. We should think of the members of the Italian School as being like the Talking Cricket—furious, pedantic critics who continually lambasted the wannabe Italian republic's corrupt ways. In the republic's youth, the talking critics reprimand the plutocratic corruption of a young nation that simply could not afford this kind of excess on multiple registers. On a smaller scale, the new Italy was not ready for fiat currency, nor could it afford the political effects of exploiting the South through economic practices associated with free-market liberalism. More broadly, the infant nation was in no position to impose a parliamentary system on a peninsula that had no experience with liberal political institutions in a context of severe regional economic inequality and with no shared language, leadership, or political tradition. Universal suffrage was used to hide Northern domination of the South, which was further impoverished through corrupt forms of electoralism that created and subsequently empowered the mafia. Most of all, Italy had no business boasting that this new shell of a parliamentary government was a democracy. It was an offense to Geppetto, who had sacrificed everything for the birth of the nation, and Collodi reminds the reader that the nation could never survive without a healthy South.[5]

What happens when a nation lies to itself about its circumstances and essence? Can a republic really grow and evolve while pretending be something

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that it is not? What happens when an electoral government tells itself it is a democracy? Perhaps the nation prefers a strictly liberal order and would rather not engage in the kind of participation and institutional elite contestation that democracy requires. What, then, is the value of calling such practices democratic?

As we shall see, in identifying the Italians as protofascist authoritarians, we, like Pinocchio, accidentally killed off the talking critics Pareto, Mosca, and Michels from the beginning. Political scientists optimistically ignored their message about the plutocratic and demagogic dangers of conflating elections and democracy—most likely because we did not want to hear it because it interfered with the lie we had begun to tell ourselves: that elections could serve as an imperfect but helpful proxy for democracy, or that free and fair elections offered the most elegant definition of democracy available. At one point in the midcentury, American political science even entertained the Pollyanna idea that a lack of participation in elections was a sign of political approval and health of the democracy itself.

Of course, this is not to say that democratic theorists have blindly conflated elections and democracy. Over the last thirty years, democratic theory has been particularly attuned to how democracy and elections came to be intertwined through a set of historical contingencies that developed after the revolutions of the eighteenth century. Many political scientists have forcefully articulated different historical formations in democratic theory that detailed the contingent braiding of democracy, elections, and representation into a singular phenomenon. Nevertheless, these accounts all seem to suggest that it is too late to go back to a time when elections and democracy were easily separable. After all, the popular imagination understands modern democracy as free and fair elections—and even if that identification is based on a series of historical contingencies, it has seemed as though, at least at this point, it would be futile to distinguish the two.

Parallel to the distance between Collodi's initial ominous warning and the midcentury Disneyfication of *Pinocchio* that has permeated all corners of the world, this book shows how political science was born out of a violent misappropriation of Italian elite theory and how this distortion developed into the idea of democratic elitism, more broadly understood as the popular definition of democracy as free and fair elections. Recounting this secret history of political science might help us better understand whether the lie we have been telling ourselves about democracy still holds water in the twenty-first century, and what, if anything, we may want to do about it.

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On Democratic Elitism and Elite Theories of Democracy

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed an explosion of synonyms for democratic elitism—an abundance that attests to the salience of the category. Minimalist, empirical, economic, proceduralist, Schumpeterian, pluralist, neo-pluralist, equilibrium, realist, and even "contemporary" theories all came to denote a model of democracy that champions elections as an institutional mechanism; a model of democracy that simultaneously allows for popular participation while actively containing it. Democratic theorists spent the twentieth century debating whether this model provides an accurate description of our current political practice and / or a desirable normative ideal.[6] What is more, the prevalence of this model encouraged thinkers to identify themselves within the confines of a convenient binary: either as advocates of the elite model or as opponents favoring a more participatory alternative.[7]

In fact, the historical genesis of democratic elitism currently remains undisputed: democratic elitism purportedly originated with the so-called Italian School of Elitism, comprised of Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923), Gaetano Mosca (1858–1941), and Robert Michels (1876–1936), who drew upon experiences with failed mass party regimes like Italian parliamentarism and the Weimar Republic, and whose thought then was refined by Joseph Schumpeter (1883–1950) in response to the twentieth-century rise of fascism and communism.[8] Yet despite the uncontested identification of democratic elitism as a twentieth-century construct, democratic theory has invoked the elite ideal far beyond these temporal confines. Today many thinkers retrospectively apply our modern understanding of democratic elitism to the history of Western political thought. Whether critical or supportive, some circles of scholarship make sense of the theory by constructing a genealogy of its institutions, logic, and rationale that spans back to ancient Rome, through the Italian republican city-states and the French and American Revolutions.[9] Even though Bernard Manin's *The Principles of Representative Government*, for example, explicitly asks how two concepts as antithetical as democracy and elections became coupled, the work ultimately connects Cicero, Francesco Guicciardini, James Harrington, Emmanuel Sieyès, and Publius into a narrative that suggests a fusion between democracy and elitism long before its twentieth-century iteration.[10] This genealogy has fostered the impression that democratic elitism comes with a two-thousand-year history, and that we ought to structure arguments about what democracy means by investigating such moments in the tradition through the lens of elite versus mass participation.

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Even when the elite theory of democracy is not explicitly at issue, democratic theorists easily become divided between two camps: one is more visibly "elitist," while the other proclaims itself to be non-elitist because of its self-professed commitment to a participatory ideal.[11] The latter contingent centers its energies on demonstrating the elitism inherent in the former's political vision while still accommodating it as a conception of democracy.

Are aggressive attempts to expose elitism in various forms of contemporary democratic theory productive for those interested in encouraging participatory norms of a forward-looking democratic progressivism? To be clear, I find genealogical inquiries that assess the sources and lineages of elite theories of democracy valuable, but I would like to investigate elite theory derivatives differently. Instead of mining the texts of canonical figures for the elitist antecedents of democratic elitism, I focus on whether these purported elitist and antidemocratic figures in the history of political thought are as elitist as we take them to be.

This study thus reexamines where, exactly, the twentieth-century conception of democratic elitism came from, why elite theories of democracy became so central to American political science, and how the construction of democratic elitism as a formal category *sui generis* facilitated the current hegemonic understanding of democracy as free and fair elections.

Conventional wisdom holds that democratic elitism is a direct offshoot of the Italian School of Elitism begun by Pareto, Mosca, and Michels. My point of departure is to ask whether these forefathers of the tradition are accurately portrayed in later formulations. I contend that the subsequent iterations mark rather startling departures from the original formulation, both substantively and methodologically. Specifically, I ask how the Italian School's concern about plutocratic tendencies inherent in liberal institutions completely disappeared in this current of intellectual history, and how these theorists perversely came to be seen as unqualified defenders of representative systems instead of what they actually were: democratically motivated critics of the conflation of democracy with electoral government.

I reveal in the course of the narrative that these dramatic departures do indeed exist, and in the rest of my analysis I take up the question of how American political science preserved the focus on the study of elites but ignored the Italian theorists' obsession with the relationship between liberal institutions and plutocratic sociopolitical arrangements. Relatedly, I ask why Pareto, Mosca, and Michels are mistakenly thought to advance "scientific" methodology, and what this says about the relationship between their work and the postwar explosion of positivism and behavioralism in American political science.

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Most importantly, this book asks what these distortions say about the state of American political science. Why did twentieth-century American political thought so forcefully articulate the elite theory of democracy and construct a rather suspect genealogy? What purpose did it serve in developing contemporary democratic theory? And are we now still constrained, politically and theoretically, by the myth of a school of thought rather than the reality?

The Italian School: Democratic Theorists of Elitism

For the last century, then, the Italian School of Elitism has been regarded as the foundation of elite theory. Pareto, Mosca, and Michels are remembered as champions of elite power who were distrustful of increased mass political participation in industrialized society. As a result, these authors, it is maintained, endorsed representative institutions because such procedures allow for popular participation while actively constraining its most deleterious effects.

My genealogy reverses this narrative of the Italian School's contribution to democratic thought. Pareto, Mosca, and Michels, I maintain, investigated elite power in order to constrain plutocratic infiltration of representative government. More specifically, they were methodologically driven to combat plutocracy by exposing the myth that electoral outcomes express popular sovereignty, and therefore facilitate democracy. Presuming that pessimistic exposure of plutocracy would revitalize animus against it, they sought to curtail the growth of plutocracy and neutralize its most objectionable excesses in representative systems. Each of their expositions analyzes different features of representative politics to reveal how electoral procedures enhance elite domination of the majority; such procedures, for the Italian School, neither secure majoritarian interest nor pose an adequate constraint on leaders' authority. These authors take up the following three issues:

Pareto highlights the connection between governing and nongoverning elites to show that parliamentary elections render politicians beholden to financial and military leaders by virtue of economic interests (Chapter 1).

Mosca details the ways minorities use the organization of representative institutions to increase their access to wealth and consequently consolidate their power under the color of a legitimizing "democratic" façade (Chapter 2).

Michels investigates political party structure to conclude that parties require a necessarily plutocratic organization to advance their platforms, a feature that precludes egalitarian distribution of resources and power (Chapter 3).

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Rather than harboring disdain for mass political incompetence, Pareto, Mosca, and Michels harbored a distrustful orientation toward elites and a "realistic" or pessimistic posture toward the democratic possibilities of liberal (representative or parliamentary) government. They expressed this attitude not to encourage resignation, but to spur action to fight these tendencies. Of course, pessimism is not foreign to the history of political thought, but unlike, say, the Frankfurt School of critical theory, the Italian School is almost never considered in such a light.[12] To the contrary, they are considered the most conservative, anti-egalitarian coterie of fin de siècle political scientists—more clever, cynical heirs to the continental counter-revolutionary thinkers Louis de Bonald, Joseph de Maistre, and Juan Donoso Cortés.

To be sure, none of these figures would have ever called himself a democrat because they identified democracy exclusively with Athenian-style assemblies, lot, and sortition. At the time of their writing, liberalism had not yet gained ideological dominance over the Western consciousness; democracy still indicated a system of government antithetical to electorally based institutional models. These authors most certainly did not think within the peculiar binary of liberal institutionalism versus Athenian "participatory" governance that preoccupied contemporary democratic theory and therefore never would have imagined that their critiques of liberalism would be interpreted as "elitist" attempts to stifle any form of popular government, electorally based or otherwise.

Contextualizing the environment in which the Italians wrote corrects this misunderstanding of what motivated their pessimistic orientation toward liberalism. Moreover, it helps unearth their political contribution to democratic theory, a theory of *buon governo* (good government) that defends electoral practices only alongside democratic institutions that aggressively regulate the plutocratic corruption of representative institutions and more regularly allow for popular contestation and judgment of elite performance outside of the electoral moment. This theory of *buon governo* champions a popular, pluralist, and anti-plutocratic platform, which can be summarized by the following three precepts:

1) Democracy requires continual contestation of elite power and vigilance against plutocratic encroachment, which can easily go undetected under liberal-representative arrangements.
2) Democratic action must focus on continual redress of material inequality. For Pareto and Mosca this meant addressing economic *regional* disparity between North and South; for Michels it meant

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imposing mechanisms that would equalize access to education and "economic status."

3) Democratic theory must consider elites, their motivations, and their modes of operation just as much as it promotes mass movements, a horizon-broadening that in no way undermines its popular or egalitarian character.

This conception contrasts with the other currents of democratic thought because it is attentive to the majority / minority divide and alive to the necessarily contestational element of democratic politics but nonetheless specifically directed at an elite audience. Pareto, Mosca, and Michels are intent to show their peers within the ruling class that democratic institutions and accountability are stabilizing forces on a polity; instead of inviting tumultuous mob rule, such procedures are actually the only forces that keep such violence at bay.

The Italian School's view of democracy thus does not confine itself to specific institutional conditions that must be fulfilled in order to identify a state as democratic. Most obviously, Pareto's, Mosca's, and Michels's works reject the static criterion of free and fair elections that postwar political scientists from Dahl to Przeworski would invoke as the necessary condition for designating a regime democratic. Neither does their thought bear any resemblance to a Rawlsian conception of justice, which demands a priori identification of the principles that would underpin a "well-ordered" society and the institutional means to satisfy such principles.[13] The Italians insist that such principles can seem to be advanced by the very institutions that pervert them, and therefore they reject any a priori conceptualizations or "ideal theory" in their formulations. Far from being interested in the Habermasian "siege model" or Sheldon Wolin's "fugitive" ideal of democracy, which are fixated on popular movements, Pareto, Mosca, and Michels were not advocating fleeting, insurrectionist, defensive positions of mass organization in moments of crisis.[14] Their conception of democracy speaks to elites about the necessity of continually reconstituting democratic procedures before such moments of breakdown, and their pessimism aims to prompt a preemptive, aggressive posture—an offensive / defensive strategy, as it were—rather than a purely defensive one.

In this sense, the Italian orientation toward democracy does not simply rest on the presence of constant "movement," nor does it regard contestation of elite power as an end in itself to promote "agonistic pluralism" of the political sphere.[15] From the Italian perspective, pessimism must be seen as an instrument. It is, in fact, supposed to *do* something: When married to a combative orientation, Pareto, Mosca, and Michels intimate, pessimism can help enact

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change for the better. As such, contestation serves as the means to implement procedures that advance economic equality, often by demonstrating the interest elites have in adopting such measures.

In the Italian case, contestation of plutocracy is part and parcel of advancing the elite project of the Risorgimento—the Italian unification process and its aftermath. Long before the wave of nineteenth-century nationalism that swept through Europe, the Italian political classes and intelligentsia had envisioned the assimilation of the peninsula's city-states into a consolidated sovereign entity, at least since Niccolò Machiavelli's exhortation in the concluding chapter of *The Prince*, if not earlier in Francesco Petrarch's clarion call "In difesa dell'Italia [Contra eum qui maledixit Italie]" (In defense of Italy).[16] But even with the formal beginnings of unification finally underway, the Italian authors warned their peers that *l'Italia* would never survive as a nation-state—*even under conditions of universal suffrage*—without regional economic redress. For Pareto and Mosca in particular, circulation of elites or competition among them, fostered through liberal institutions, is simply not enough to qualify a regime as democratic, whether in its modern formulation or otherwise. Both of their life projects were devoted to the permanence of Italian unification. As such, they tirelessly fought against the conflation of elections and democracy because they thought that, through plutocratic domination, this equation made modern popular government in Italy impossible. They believed that the nexus of representation and democracy sullied the benefits of representative forms of popular government because it increased democratic expectations of elections and facilitated plutocratic outcomes. When electoral institutions fail to provide the democratic results that they promise, the enterprise's entire legitimacy is called into question.

Michels, as discussed in Chapter 3, presents a more ambiguous understanding of the conflation of elections and democracy. Most commentators argue that if any of these three thinkers could be conceived of as a democratic theorist, it would be the non-Italian of the group, the German-born Michels. In the conventional understanding, the German émigré to Italy applies Pareto's and Mosca's thought to a conception of modern democracy defined by competition among elites, thus rendering his infamous "iron law of oligarchy," or the inevitability of oligarchy, not nearly as inflexible—and in fact far more democratic—than one might think. According to the existing literature, Michels used Mosca's and Pareto's elitism to produce what in actuality was merely a "bronze law" of oligarchy from which we could convincingly develop a new view of democracy based on liberal elections.[17]

Through the first three chapters I challenge this view that Michels democratized Pareto's and Mosca's thought through his emphasis on elite competi-

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tion. If anything, Michels—who was far less sensitive to the problems and the promise of the Risorgimento—initiated the corruption of Italian democratic theory: Michels's more German-inspired political thought opened the door to efforts validating the conflation of elections and modern democracy, an idea that has now become so pervasive that it seems too formidable a force to resist.

Chapter 4 reveals how the Austrian Schumpeter deployed the German-born Michels's thought and radicalized the conflation of elections and democracy. The chapter offers an alternative reading of Schumpeter's seminal *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, in which I demonstrate how Schumpeter's sardonic dare to identify democracy as competitive elections simultaneously inherited and transformed the major precepts of elite theory, but not for the reasons that would later be claimed by postwar political science. His alternative to representative democracy, the "alternate theory of competitive leadership," proposed identifying democracy simply as an electoral method. As such, it utilized the approaches of his Italian predecessors to invert their most sacred lesson: If we define it this way, he dared, democracy can just as easily be understood as its opposite.

Chapter 5 investigates the reception of the Italian School and Schumpeter's thought in the development of American political science as a discipline. I assess how American political scientists such as C. Wright Mills, Robert Dahl, Peter Bachrach, Carole Pateman, and Adam Przeworski took Schumpeter up on his dare to redefine democracy as competitive elections through a misunderstanding of Pareto, Mosca, and Michels, thereby transforming both the original contributions of the Italian School and the thrust of *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* as a whole.

My revisionist genealogy hopes to recover an Italian political precept that may serve us in our own moment: as the Italians argued, equating elections and democracy is not a mere matter of semantics; rather, it occludes plutocratic and demagogic threats that reside within representative systems, ultimately destroying the distinct contributions that both representation and democracy potentially offer popular government.

Pessimism Constrains Plutocracy

How did this wild perversion of the Italian School happen? If it turns out that Italians were not antidemocratic "elitists" after all, then how did they earn this reputation that has dogged political science for the last century? And if their critique of plutocracy was indeed so explicit, how was it so easily ignored by American political science?

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The Italian affiliated intellectuals are not remembered as critics of plutocracy for a variety of interconnected political, historical, and theoretical reasons. The story of the Italian School of Elitism is a classic game of telephone in which the final American utterance is nothing like the original Italian one: the Italian elite theorists Mosca and Pareto found their natural progeny in Mittel-European figures Michels and Schumpeter, who ferried elite theory to the US academy, where it was assimilated, transformed, and distorted by Lipset, Dahl, et al. In this case, the layers of redescription generated a category of democratic elitism that justified the equation of elections and democracy, thereby ironically occluding the Italians' warnings about the dangers of conflating them.

Most obviously, the Cold War and its effects on social science formation in the postwar period played a significant role in the vilification of the Italian theorists as conservative proto-authoritarians. The postwar ideological desire of American political scientists to construct a foreign, more extreme understanding of "elite circulation," "the ruling-class theory," or "the iron law of oligarchy"—one conveniently linked to fascism—partially motivated them to falsify Italian theories so as to position their own theories as being less elitist and therefore more palatable to an American "democratic" public in the midst of a "Cold War" struggle with a more totalitarian enemy. This foil allowed thinkers like Seymour Martin Lipset and Robert Dahl to articulate a theory of democracy that not only made more permissible the plutocracy that the Italian thinkers feared but also eliminated the intellectual concern over plutocratic tendencies in liberal democracy.

This ideological motivation coalesced with the problems posed by historical and contextual translation. Twentieth-century American political scientists faced a very different set of political concerns than those Pareto, Mosca, and Michels confronted, and therefore interpreted these forefathers of the tradition from another perspective. Thomas Piketty, in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, demonstrated that the post–World War II generation in Western Europe and North America experienced an unprecedented and highly abnormal level of material equality.[18] Consequently, he argues, although plutocracy had previously appeared to social scientists and historians as a transhistorical phenomenon, the second half of the century was able to legitimately marginalize this issue and instead focus on what political and intellectual elites found to be a more pressing concern: containing totalitarianism and authoritarianism, which at the time many believed originated in the failure of excessively participatory government structures. Theorists as different as Charles Merriam and James Burnham, on the one hand, and Seymour Martin Lipset and Robert Dahl, on the other, thus looked to the Italian

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School with different eyes and a new set of problems to resolve. As such, American scholars read Pareto, Mosca, and Michels with more optimism about plutocratic containment than had been possible for the Italian School, and therefore underscored other elements in their texts at the expense of ignoring their most explicit anxieties.

Postwar socioeconomic conditions exacerbated the extent to which Americans could not recognize the context of nineteenth-century Risorgimento politics—a rampantly plutocratic environment wildly different from the uncharacteristically equal political-economic landscape of the postwar period.[19] Importantly, these Italian authors did not dedicate their lives to fighting plutocracy as an end in and of itself. Instead, they were committed to realizing the Italian unified state as a lasting project and insisted that combatting the Risorgimento's parliamentary plutocracy was crucial for generating a salutary modern popular government in Italy.[20] Postwar American readers could not appreciate the extreme plutocratic fragility that threatened the very existence of the Italian state at the turn of the nineteenth century, and consequently misread the Italians' concerns as a full-scale denunciation of liberalism tout court.

Recognizing the way in which plutocracy drops out of the equation is key to understanding the history of American political science, its behavioral turn, and its peculiar "realistic" or "empirical" approach to the study of politics. The disappearance of the concern about plutocracy induced American authors to misunderstand the "scientific" character of the Italians' orientation toward the role of elites. Despite the exclusively empirical register in which we now understand ideas like "elite circulation," "the ruling class," or the "iron law of oligarchy," the Italians treated politics historically and normatively: they were trying to understand how and why representative institutions developed in a disappointing way through a Vichian approach to science, a position that rejected the simplistic Cartesian emphasis on causal reasoning and empirical observation and eschewed moralism in political discourse.[21] Drawing from their acceptance of the inevitability of elite domination, postwar American political scientists set out to establish scientific laws for the development of institutions—laws so absolute that they permitted no effective mitigation of elite influence. Works like Dahl's *Who Governs?* were offered as models for how political rule develops everywhere, despite his book having been based on a study of New Haven city politics. This model became paradigmatic in the interest-group approach to the Western study of elites, which held that interest group competition was a standard that even the Soviet Union was thought to share with the United States. Ironically, the committed anti-historicist Leo Strauss was

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the only major resource for midcentury political scientists seeking to critique "value free" positivist scientism. Had Pareto and Mosca been properly recovered, then we might have avoided the worst excesses of behavioralism, anti-institutionalism, and myopic obsession with elections.[22]

Some might wonder whether the Italians' warnings of the connection between elections and plutocracy are particular to the social and political conditions of post-Risorgimento Italy or whether they hold more broadly. But in the Italian understanding, the particularities of the Risorgimento's plutocratic parliamentarism did not conflict with recognizing the more generalizable connections between electoral institutions and plutocratic corruption. The Italian nation-state was a particularly egregious example of how unfettered electoral processes generate plutocratic outcomes and unrepresentative government. While the Italian School theorists diagnosed plutocracy as endemic to electoral institutions, their normative projects investigated a wide variety of comparative (geographical and economic) contexts in order to identify which social, economic, and institutional variables have historically controlled for plutocratic capture of electoral government.

In other words, the Italian case distilled the inherent connection between elections and plutocracy that can ultimately lead to the corruption of those very same representative institutions. Pareto, Mosca, and Michels understood their approach as "scientific" because they posited the intrinsic relationship as a generalizable law, but this did not mean that they saw the post-Risorgimento period as perfectly emblematic of how elections operate in all historical circumstances. They stressed the variable success of representative governments across the Continent to emphasize that this law need not be fatalistically interpreted. Ironically, the Italians would have classified Dahl's *Who Governs?* as quintessentially "anti-scientific" precisely because it uses anecdotal evidence of city politics in Connecticut as a proxy for how politics works universally.

Finally, the misinterpretation of the Italian school thinkers also stemmed from a misreading of the pessimistic tradition to which they belonged and the accompanying literary sensibility they expressed. Pessimism is a philosophical approach that emphasizes human limitations in order to provoke self-conscious confrontation with fundamental obstacles to human flourishing.[23] Educated in the late nineteenth century—a time when pessimism reached its apex within European discourse—Pareto, Mosca, and Michels, and in some respects Schumpeter, are better situated within the tradition of pessimism than within the tradition of elitism with which they are currently affiliated. Much like famed pessimists such as Nietzsche, Weber, and Ortega y Gasset, the authors discussed here offered pessimistic accounts of democracy and posited grim

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warnings about the future of European liberalism that were mistaken for celebrations of oligarchic domination.

Of course, authors who subscribe to pessimism are not all the same, and one does not need to be aware of this philosophical discourse to appreciate the pessimism of a particular figure. In order to assess the value of various kinds of pessimism and other affective postures, I propose a mode of reading that focuses on what I call literary "sensibility" or "disposition" within a particular historical-intellectual context. Here, I refer to a rhetorical tone and nuance clearly detectable within a text—a tone available to any readership, accessible beyond the esoteric level intended only for an elect audience. Dispositional readings can alert us to such sensibilities so that one may find in texts something critical that otherwise seems dispassionate or prescriptive, as was the case with the Italians and Schumpeter; or conversely, something that seems ambivalent but should be considered resigned or sanguine, as was the case with Lipset and Dahl.

This book traces the shift in the literary dispositions that undergird what we now call "elite theories of democracy." The chapters identify the rhetorical sensibility expressed in each moment, contrasting Italian variants of pessimism and Schumpeter's sardonic irony with American postwar optimism. By isolating these dispositional expressions, I demonstrate how these different literary moods served as imperatives for various—and contrasting—political ends. I claim, somewhat counterintuitively, that the pessimism and irony expressed respectively by the Italian School and Schumpeter left open possibilities for democracy seldom recognized within the "elitist" model, and that, conversely, the Americans infused optimism into this understanding of representative government with perniciously complacent consequences for subsequent democratic theory. Specifically, Lipset's and Dahl's hopeful ambivalence expressed in their "nouveau elitism" induced American political science to live content with narrow empirical orientations to democracy, with constricted liberal institutional choices, and with plutocratic tendencies. While Schumpeter's work undoubtedly provoked the perverted American reception of the Italian School, attention to the irony through which he conducts his socioeconomic analysis and conveys his political prescriptions ought to change the way we perceive the elite "tradition."

In what follows I complicate what we understand as "elite" democratic theory, and question whether this school has been mislabeled all along.[24] I refer to the Italians as the "forefathers" of this tradition in deference to the common understanding of these thinkers, and not to designate them as genuinely elitist in any normative way. On the contrary, I aim to convince readers that we ought

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Index

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