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8

Methods of Elite Identification

Ursula Hoffmann-Lange

Defining and identifying an elite population are the crucial first stage in elite research. Unlike mass populations, for which surveys rely on random sampling that allows inferences about their characteristics, the size and structure of elite populations are unknown at the outset of research. Their identification involves a number of steps and decisions by researchers.

First, a theoretical and operational definition of political elites is needed that can serve as the basis for selection criteria. In order to be universally applicable, this definition must be parsimonious and it must provide unambiguous criteria of elite status that preclude circular explanations.[1] Substantive characteristics of elites—especially characteristics with normative connotations—must be treated as empirical questions rather than being definitional aspects of elites. For instance, Meisel's (1958) definition assumes that elites are characterized by "three Cs," namely group consciousness, cohesion, and conspiracy. It excludes elites that do not fulfill all three criteria and therefore violates the requirement of universal applicability.

A definition of elites as groups or individuals with regular and substantial influence on important decisions within an organization or a society is general enough to make the elite concept applicable to all kinds of social systems (Putnam 1976; Higley and Burton 2006). When applied to whole societies, this definition includes all political and societal elites involved in influencing

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policy decisions, either because they are constitutionally authorized to make binding decisions for a polity or because they command important resources enabling them to influence important decisions. Such resources are, *inter alia*, information needed by decision-makers, capacities for swaying public opinion, or veto powers to prevent or subvert the implementation of policy decisions.

While studies of single elite groups can sometimes rely on complete rosters of top position-holders and use probability sampling to survey them, studies of entire elite formations—studies of community or national elites and power structures—normally use *purposive sampling* (Tansey 2007). This makes identifying elite members an integral part of the research process. Three basic methods have been developed for purposive sampling: positional, decisional, and reputational (Parry 1969; Scott 2004; Hoffmann-Lange 2007).

The Positional Method

The positional method for identifying elites is based on the assumption that political influence in complex societies is vested in formal leadership positions located in a broad range of political, business, military, media, and various civil society institutions and organizations. The method is used most frequently by scholars, who presume that elite structure is pluralistic, but it has sometimes been employed by scholars, such as C. Wright Mills (1956) and John Scott (2004), who assume the existence of an integrated "power elite" or "ruling class." Although these theorists acknowledge that modern democracies are organizationally diverse, they claim that the diversity of organizations and interests they embody are not reflected in the elite structure. They assume that power is more concentrated in a small power elite than exponents of pluralism believe, so that participation in crucial policy decisions is limited to a small circle or knot of actors with common social backgrounds and interests that are concealed by a diversity of organizations and interests that, in terms of decisive power, is more apparent than real.

The positional method is most widely used for identifying elites at the national level. It has been applied in many countries, including Australia, Finland, South Africa, the USA, Russia, and Germany (Hoffmann-Lange 2007, p. 919). The method involves several research steps. The first is a decision about the approximate number of elite members to be included in a study. This decision usually depends upon the extent of available research funds and staff. Studies utilizing the positional method have ranged from a few hundred position-holders (Zapf 1965) to 5000 or more (Dye 2014).

The second research step involves a decision about the societal sectors to be taken into account. While the explicitly political sector is almost always included, the inclusion of other sectors depends on assumptions about their political importance. For example, C. Wright Mills (1956) assumed that the United States in the 1950s was governed by a *triangle of power* consisting of elites in the executive political, corporate business, and military sectors. Comparing British and French elites in the years immediately following World War II, Raymond Aron (1950, p. 9) distinguished five key elite sectors: "political leaders, government administrators, economic directors, leaders of the masses, and military chiefs." There is, nonetheless, broad scholarly agreement about the major sectors and bases of power in modern democratic societies:

- Politics: Constitutional authority to take binding decisions;
- Public administration: Drafting and implementation of legislation;
- Armed forces: Protection of the country against foreign (and domestic) enemies;
- Private business: Production of economic goods and services;
- Mass media: Information for the public and checks on power abuses;
- Academia and education: Production and dissemination of knowledge;
- Voluntary associations, especially business associations and labor unions: Collective political action.

Other sectors have sometimes been subsumed under these major sectors or have been studied separately: appellate courts, large churches and religious movements, major professional associations, and influential cultural institutions.

The third research step involves determining the most important organizations in each sector studied. Some sectors are comprised of distinct subsectors of organizations that preclude the application of a single criterion of organizational importance. In politics, for example, one has to distinguish between executive and legislative leadership positions as well as between leadership positions in the largest or most pivotal parties. Because modern political institutions, business corporations, and civil society organizations typically have well-documented hierarchical structures, the final two steps of the positional method involve identifying the uppermost positions in these structures and locating their incumbents.[2]

A survey study of the German national elite in 1995 provides a good illustration of the positional method for identifying elites. The German researchers' positional sample encompassed a total of 3941 incumbents of

elite positions in 14 sectors. Interviews with 2341 of these incumbents were completed with a response rate of 59.4% (Bürklin and Rebenstorf 1997, pp. 38 and 65). Similarly, each of Thomas Dye's eight iterative studies of US elites between 1976 and 2014 examined several thousand positional elites in ten or more sectors and together provided an unparalleled documentation of the changing personal and professional profiles and organizational ties of US elites over four decades (Dye 2014).

The positional method does not give guidelines for specifying the horizontal and vertical boundaries of an elite. The inclusion of elite sectors and the choice of cut-off criteria for distinguishing elite and non-elite positions have to rely on the results of previous research into the importance of different sectors, organizations, and leadership positions. Although the positional method enables the identification and study of a wide range of elite groups, groups and individual position-holders cannot be assumed to be equally powerful or influential. Therefore, unweighted aggregations of multiple sectors imply that the number of respondents in the different sectors determines the distribution of characteristics in the entire elite sample. Drawing valid conclusions about *the elite* of a country presupposes a weight for the political influence of individual elite members that can only be determined by an analysis of decision-making networks (Knoke 1993, p. 29).

The positional method also risks underestimating the degree to which power is centralized or overestimating the degree to which it is dispersed and plural. Moreover, power and influence are never perfectly correlated with positions held. Holding an elite position does not necessarily imply the actual use of the power resources associated with the position. Finally, the method gives little or no attention to political influence not based on positional resources, but rather on a personal reputation for being well informed, having close connections with important actors, or possessing bargaining skills of a high order (Putnam 1976, p. 16).

Despite these shortcomings, the positional method is a sound way to study the characteristics of elites—their backgrounds, careers as well as cleavage lines within and between different sectors. It also enables a comparison of the characteristics of a country's elite with those of its population. If selection criteria are well documented by researchers, the positional method ensures a high degree of reliability. Finally, the method is also applicable to studies of historical elites. It lends itself to longitudinal analyses of developments in the organizational structures of polities and in the personal and professional characteristics of elites over considerable periods of time. For example, Wolfgang Zapf's study of German elites between 1919 and 1961 documented continuities as well as changes in the composition of elites associated

with three political regime changes, in 1919, 1933, and 1945 1949. A study of European parliamentary elites since 1848 traces continuities and changes in the social characteristics of parliamentary "party families" over a period of 150 years (Best and Cotta 2000; Cotta and Best 2007).

The Decisional Method

The decisional method identifies elites according to their active involvement in important policy decisions. The method was developed in Robert Dahl's seminal study of power in New Haven, Connecticut (1961). Dahl studied a number of decision-making processes in four different policy domains during the 1950s, relying on participant observation, official records, documents, newspapers, and personal interviews. He identified 50 top leaders and 1063 sub-leaders who participated in at least one of the decision-making processes. By initiating or vetoing policy proposals, the 50 top leaders had been the most regular and successful participants in governing New Haven.

Dahl's main finding was the high degree to which political participation and influence was specialized among both top leaders and sub-leaders. Only 3% (n 32) of the latter had been actively involved in more than one policy domain (ibid., p. 175). Likewise, only three of the 50 top leaders had successfully initiated or vetoed policies in more than one domain; 20 of the 50 had successfully influenced more than one decision in a single domain; but 27 had influenced only one decision (ibid., pp. 181 182). Contrary to conventional wisdom, the number of social and economic notables in New Haven with influence on policy decisions was not pronounced: only 11 notables were among the top 50 leaders.[3]

Like the positional method, the decisional method involves several research steps when identifying the politically most influential persons. The first step is to choose important policy decisions and domains. This is relatively straightforward in community power studies, because the range of policies that communities can pursue autonomously is usually quite narrow. Legislation and policies that have an impact on society at large are usually the prerogative of national governments, and at that level, the range of key policies and policy domains is much wider. The wide range makes it more difficult to select a sample of policy decisions that can be considered as representative of all policy decisions in a country. It is obvious that the complexity of national policy-making cannot be captured adequately by studying who is involved in decisions about a small number of issues. This limits the decisional method's utility when studying national elites.

Although official records and documents, media reports, and direct observation usually provide the names of important participants in decisions, most decisional studies have used the positional approach as their starting point. This is usually supplemented by other sources of information as well as by additional names of important actors that are gathered during interviews. Positional elites not directly involved in decision-making are then deleted from the original list and the newly gathered names are added. Dahl identified decisional elites in New Haven by counting the number of successful policy initiatives and vetoes. Alternatively, the composition of decisional elites can also be determined by asking positional elites to name influential persons who are then selected as additional respondents if they have been mentioned by several others ("snowball sampling").

Bachrach and Baratz (1962), Lukes (2005), and others have criticized the decisional method, because it is limited to studying actual decisions and excludes issues that never reach the decision-making stage (non-decisions). This may happen if issues are promoted by minor political actors and fail to achieve the support of influential actors, or if key influentials successfully try to keep such issues off the political agenda. The probability that influentials promote or prevent decisions without being actively involved in the decision-making process is a clear weakness of the decisional method. The weakness has at least two causes. On the one hand, delegates of top position-holders or gray eminences may promote the preferences of position-holders. On the other hand, the preferences of influentials may be anticipated by those who make decisions that deliberately avoid vetoes (Putnam 1976, p. 7). In the former case, the decisional method may falsely identify actors as powerful although they are actually representing the interests of others; in the latter case, the method may miss some of the most powerful persons so that, although they do not visibly participate, their known or anticipated preferences nevertheless affect the content of decisions.

The Organizational State, by Edward Laumann and David Knoke (1987), is an example of the decisional method being applied at a national political level, although it was limited to two national policy domains in the United States: energy and health. Drawing on testimony before congressional committees, newspaper accounts, and registers of lobbyists, the authors constructed and then combined multiple lists of organizations that participated in policy decisions in one or the other domain. They asked experts to nominate additional individual and collective actors. Organizations that received at least five nominations were added to the final list. The study showed that organizations, not individuals, were the principal actors in federal energy and health policy decisions (Knoke 1993, p. 40). It revealed the existence of similar

inter-organizational networks of political influence in both domains. The networks consisted of large numbers of private (about three quarters) as well as public organizations. Governmental actors occupied the core positions in both networks and were surrounded in each by a circle of major special interests and by peripheries of minor claimants (Laumann and Knoke 1987 p. 377; Knoke 1993 p. 34). The joint involvement of public and private actors indicated that the public-private distinction did not play much of a role in decision-making, hence the authors' choice of the term "the organizational state" (Laumann and Knoke 1987, p. 382).

A large comparative study of the United States, Germany, and Japan that utilized the same methodological approach analyzed decision-making networks in labor policy-making during the 1980s (Knoke et al. 1996). Its findings supported the earlier finding of a blurred separation between public and private actors in the three countries.

The Reputational Method

The reputational method relies on experts in order to identify elites. The method was introduced by Floyd Hunter in a community power study of Atlanta, Georgia (1953) and later applied to the national level in his study of "Top Leadership U.S.A." (1959). In the latter study, Hunter started with a list of influential national associations that were asked "to give the names of five national leaders (exclusive of elected and appointed officials) considered to be of top influence in national policy-making" (ibid., p. xiv). The nominations yielded a list of nearly 500 leaders. This list was then successively amended during several rounds of interviews over the period from 1953 to 1958. Interviewees were asked which of the persons on the list they knew personally, if they had worked with some of them when developing specific policies, and to assign persons on the list an influence rating of 1, 2, or 3 (ibid., p. 167).

It turned out that "between 100 and 200 men consistently were chosen as top leaders and were considered by all informants to be of national policy-making stature" (ibid., p. 167). One hundred of them received by far the highest number of top rankings. Most of these leaders knew each other personally, while "second and third raters knew fewer and fewer of the number-one group" (ibid., p. 168). The structure of the uppermost leadership group tended toward closure: their names regularly appeared in the national press and they represented "a cross-section of national civic life" (ibid., p. 173). Fifty-two of the top 100 reputational leaders were elected politicians or political appointees, while 23 were business leaders (ibid., p. 199).

Hunter's account of how he determined his several lists of influentials was shaky, to say the least. He gave little information about the several stages of his research process, nor did he explain how his lists of influentials were presented in the interviews he conducted. It seems unlikely that his respondents, who were national leaders with tight time schedules, were actually asked to examine lists containing several hundred names. Moreover, although political leaders were excluded initially, they were included in Hunter's last two rounds of interviews. It is also unclear how data from successive waves of interviews were combined to determine the top 100 power-wielders. These methodological flaws were criticized by Dahl (1960) in a scathing review of Hunter's book. The flaws cast serious doubt on the validity of Hunter's findings.

Hunter's book points to a fundamental weakness of the reputational method. The method seems applicable in community power research where the number of political influentials is relatively small. But its usefulness at the national level, where there is a much larger and more diverse number of actors, is questionable. In complex national settings with a multiplicity of decision-making arenas, knowledge of who the consequential actors are tends to be limited to those who are personally involved in a specific policy domain. Therefore, a large number of experts for different policy domains are needed to compile a comprehensive roster of persons reputed to be politically influential. Relying on just a small number of informants instead risks reproducing subjective "images of power" rather than valid results (Scott 2004, p. 86). Since it seems impossible to find expert informants who are capable and willing to rate the political influence of hundreds of leaders in an array of policy domains, researchers have tended to use short lists of a limited number of top leaders that result in finding a small "power elite."

In combination with the positional or decisional methods, however, asking respondents to identify top influentials in their own organizations or in policy decisions in which they have been personally involved makes sense and has been successfully applied by Laumann, Knoke, and others as a form of snowball sampling.

Comparing Methods

The choice of method for identifying and studying elites is associated with theoretical differences about the loci of power and influence in modern societies and also with different objectives of elite research. Scholars who assume that modern societies are characterized by a pluralist power structure tend to apply the positional or the decisional method, while scholars who

Table 8.1 A comparison of the positional, decisional and reputational methods of elite identification

Resources of political influence	Personal involvement in political decision-making: Active involvement	Personal involvement in political decision-making: Active involvement or indirect influence
Positional resources	Positional method: constitutionally authorized political decision-makers only	Positional method: Incumbents of leadership positions in political institutions and civil society organizations
Positional resources or personal resources	Decisional method	Reputational method

suspect the existence of a highly integrated power elite tend to utilize the reputational method or a narrowly defined positional sample. Ultimately, each of the methods focuses on different aspects of power and influence along two dimensions:

- the influence resources of elites
- personal involvement in political decision-making

A combination of these two dimensions yields four strategies for identifying elites (Table 8.1). It is self-evident that limiting research to politicians with formal decision-making authority yields the most restrictive identification of elites. Therefore, most studies using the positional method have extended the elite concept to encompass the second dimension by including elites located in a broad spectrum of public institutions and influential private organizations who are not necessarily personally involved in policy decisions. The decisional method limits analysis to active participants in political decision-making, regardless of the resources on which their influence is based. The reputational method is the most inclusive in terms of both influence resources and involvement in policy decisions. But this method tends to be more exclusionary than the other two methods, and it usually points to the existence of a small and tightly integrated power elite.

The most fundamental decision that elite researchers have to make is on boundary specification, which presupposes a single criterion of elite membership. The positional method does not specify such a criterion. This is why it is not possible to draw firm conclusions about the characteristics and structure of an elite formation from a positional sample of elites. Higley et al. (1991) solved this problem by combining the positional method with the reputational method. The holders of American, Australian, and (West) German elite

positions were asked to name influential actors with whom they regularly interacted in the context of the national policy issue on which they had been most active during the preceding year. While most of the actors named were holders of elite positions, the questioning also yielded a small number of persons who did not hold any leadership positions.

The reputational method typically requires that to be included in a study, a person must receive at least a specified number of nominations. The decisional method uses the frequency of either participation in or success in influencing a final decision to include a person in a study. Therefore, each method for identifying elites will produce a different elite population. Using data from a community power study in a medium-sized West German city, Franz Urban Pappi (1984) found that perceptions of political influence (reputation) tended to be highly skewed toward a small number of key decision-makers, while the decisional method yielded a more inclusive, pluralist elite manifesting a diversity of power resources. He found that in the decisional approach, but not in the reputational approach, the incumbents of formal leadership positions turned out to be the most central actors. The correlation between centrality in the communication network and a reputation for power was only a modest r 0.43, which suggested that "the two measures touch different aspects of influence" (ibid., pp. 92 93).

Hicks et al. (2015) recently developed a novel method of identifying elites. They studied *reported elites* in Indonesia by relying on the co-occurrence of names in digitized national newspapers. In a first step, they included the 1500 names with the highest frequency of co-occurrence. Next, they manually screened out politically irrelevant individuals, primarily sports celebrities, foreign personages, historical or recently deceased figures as well as names that could not be pinned down. The reduced list of 815 persons was then compared to a manually collected list of 1178 positional elites made up of politicians (cabinet ministers, legislators, party leaders, regional governors, etc.), top departmental bureaucrats, the 50 richest business leaders, top military officers, judges serving in national courts, but no civil society elites. Only 22% of the positional elites were found in the sample of 815 reported elites, which included "more than double the proportion of business and military actors as the positional method, and almost half the amount of politicians" (ibid., p. 394). The authors attributed this relatively low overlap partly to national peculiarities, in particular the major role of military leaders in Indonesia, but also to the fact that their list of positional elites did not include representatives of civil society organizations that are usually included in comprehensive national elite studies (media, business and labor associations, academia, large voluntary associations). Nevertheless, the smaller share of

politicians among the reported elites was probably a substantive result of the identification method. This indicates that other elites may play a more important role in political agenda-setting than is usually assumed by elite researchers. The Hicks et al. method certainly warrants further exploration. Given the increased availability of digitized news archives, their procedure of elite identification is a convenient alternative to the positional method for setting up an initial list of (potential) elites, which can then be compared to and complemented by other methods.[4]

A similar method of using a large relational data-base for elite identification was employed by Larsen and Ellersgaard (2017). These authors started out with a sample of nationally important organizations in Denmark and then determined official committees within these organizations (e.g. advisory or supervisory boards) that comprised representatives of other organizations and thus provided inter-organizational ties. Altogether, 1256 committees with a total of 5079 members were included in the analysis. The analysis uncovered a core elite of 423 members within the overall network of these 5079 individuals. While the authors emphasized that this method ensures a high degree of reliability, it is obvious that it is not as inductive as they claim. The selection of organizations and committees involves a decision on the relevant aspects of power and influence to be studied. The inclusion of royal events in the Danish study, for example, shows that the authors considered national prominence (prestige) as a relevant criterion of elite membership. Therefore, the core elite found in the analysis deviated considerably from a purely positional elite sample. The method also requires a decision on a threshold for the number of sociometric ties an individual needs for inclusion in the core elite, which influences its size and density.

Conclusions

This meta-analysis of different methods to identify elite populations has shown that the choice of method is consequential for the results achieved. Controversy about the validity of the three classic methods of elite identification is closely related to the fundamental theoretical question regarding the degree of power concentration in modern societies. While the reputational approach tends to find relatively small and closed *power elites*, both the positional and the decisional method find pluralist elite structures in which power and influence are more specialized and differentiated. Ultimately, the question of the degree to which political power and influence are concentrated cannot be answered in

an absolute way, but a good deal of light can be shed through comparative research.

The positional method does not provide criteria for determining the influence of the position-holders selected for analysis, nor for elite boundaries. Boundary specification requires additional data about power reputation, active involvement in policy decision-making, or ties between elite members such as their frequency of communication about policies. The size of the resulting elite depends on the threshold set for inclusion: the higher a threshold is set, the smaller the resulting elite population will be. The choice of the method of elite identification and the choice of a threshold for inclusion determine the size and structure of the elite found in elite studies. Therefore, empirical research on elites is compatible with both the assumption of a small and exclusive power elite or of a large and inclusive pluralistic elite. The two recent studies of elite networks indicate a renewed interest in the composition of national elites. They have expanded the methodological repertoire of elite research to uncover important aspects of power structures, thereby broadening our ability to study the determinants of access to the central decision-making arenas in modern democracies.

Notes

1. Circular explanations about the role of elites can only be avoided by defining operational criteria for elite status that are independent of influence on policy decisions. For instance, for testing the assumption that new policies are normally introduced by elites rather than non-elites, elite status has to be measured independently from policy initiation.
2. Because elite members may hold several elite positions at the same time, the sample of position-holders will normally be smaller after eliminating positional interlocks. This requires a decision on which of several positions is the most important one. The degree of such interlocks depends on the degree of specialization of sectors and organizations (partly determined by incompatibility rules) and differs across sectors and countries. In the German elite study of 1995, the total of 4587 positions was thereby reduced to 3941 individual elite members (Bürklin and Rebenstorf 1997, pp. 38 and 65).
3. Social notables were identified by their inclusion in a number of social registers, while the 50 largest property owners were considered as economic notables.
4. This method is a variant of what Laumann et al. (1983) have described as a *relational method* of elite identification. It relies on the presence or absence of a particular type of relation among political actors and allows the identification of elites who maintain “important relationships with other system members” (Knoke 1993, p. 30).

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