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## CHAPTER 49

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# METHODS OF ELITE RESEARCH

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URSULA HOFFMANN-LANGE

POWER and elites are universal social phenomena. The distinction between elites and non-elites is therefore an important aspect of social analysis. In the social sciences, elites are customarily defined by their influence on strategic (political) decisions that shape the living conditions in a society.

Elite research studies the characteristics of politicians and other holders of leadership positions in powerful public institutions and private organizations who are distinguished by their regular participation in (political) decision making. This definition comes closest to the phenomenon of power and influence the fathers of elite theory, Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca, had in mind (cf. Bottomore 1993).<sup>1</sup>

This elite concept is narrow and broad at the same time. It excludes a large group of individuals whom many people would spontaneously consider as belonging to the *elite*, for example, prominent athletes, artists, scholars, intellectuals, or the owners of large fortunes. Such individuals are distinguished by their exclusive lifestyles or they may be admired for their achievements. However, most of them do not have much influence on important (political) decision making. On the other hand, elites can be found in any social system, for example, in parliaments, political parties, corporations, and labor unions. Similarly, the regional focus may range from a local elite to a national or even transnational elite. Most frequently, however, the elite concept is used for national elites. Even though elite research frequently focuses on political elites, it needs to be emphasized that the elite concept is not limited to

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that Mosca himself did not use the term “elite,” but rather “political class” or “ruling class,” which he defined as the minority of influential persons involved in the management of public affairs (1939, 50).

politicians, on the contrary. Its analytical value rests on the assumption that political decision making involves other elites as well.

Since the number of studies of specialized elites is rather large, the present overview will be mostly limited to research on national elites. The methodological and practical problems in choosing an appropriate research design and in conducting an elite study, however, are the same for studying elites in other contexts as well.

The classical elite theories conceptualized power as dichotomous and therefore assumed the existence of a clear distinction between elites and non-elites (or masses). While this crude distinction may be considered as an acceptable simplification of social reality for pre-modern societies in which power was concentrated in the hands of a small hereditary nobility, modern societies are not only characterized by a more or less continuous distribution of power, but also by the lack of a single center of power and by a high degree of horizontal differentiation.

Power and influence may be based on a variety of resources located in different sectors of society, for example, political authority, judicial discretion, economic power, academic or administrative expertise, or influence on public opinion. Moreover, while the assumption of a clearly defined hierarchy of power may be considered as an appropriate approximation of intra-organizational power relations, interorganizational interactions involve multilateral bargaining on a more or less equal footing. This implies a pluralist elite structure and the lack of clearly demarcated vertical boundaries between elites and non-elites, as influence levels off the further we move from the top to the bottom and from more central to more peripheral actors.

## 1 FIELDS OF ELITE RESEARCH

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Elite research may be broadly classified into four substantive areas. *Social background studies* collect data on family background (socioeconomic status of parents), regional background, religious affiliation, and education. This allows us to compare the social backgrounds of elites to those of the general population. It also allows us to determine important prerequisites of elite careers. Such data are of considerable theoretical significance, since they show to what degree the advancement to positions of power and influence is determined by the economic, social, and cultural capital of one's family. The permeability of social barriers to advancement into elite positions is apt to have considerable variation across elite sectors and societies.

Because of the relationship between social background and educational opportunities, elite studies usually confirm what Putnam has called *the law of increasing disproportion* (Putnam 1976, 33–6). Elite recruitment is closely related to the prevailing mobility patterns in a society. In modern societies, a high level of formal qualification is a crucial precondition for achieving elite positions. The social and

cultural capital provided by one's family of origin, however, remains important as well.

Second, elite research analyzes elite careers: the more or less structured patterns of professional advancement that eventually lead into elite positions. Career patterns vary between sectors and organizations, depending on the qualifications that are considered important by selectorates at crucial career stages. For comparing the elites of different sectors and organizations, the degree of professional specialization is a crucial variable that can show if more emphasis is placed on specialized knowledge or rather on generalist qualifications acquired in different organizational contexts.

Third, elite research makes it possible to study the activities, values, and attitudes and reveal patterns of conflict and consensus among different elite groups. Fourth, questions asking for elite interactions provide crucial information on the access of various elite groups as well as of non-elites to central political decision makers, as well as on the overall degree of elite integration.

The purpose of most elite surveys is the systematic collection of information on the social characteristics, role perceptions, value orientations, and attitudes of the elite respondents, although elites may also be interviewed in their capacity as participants in collective decision making, for example, for reconstructing particular policy decisions or for oral history projects (e.g. Raab 1987). Counting the latter studies as *elite research* would stretch the scope of the present chapter too far, however, because it would imply that any research involving interviews with political actors would qualify as elite research.

## 2 OPERATIONALIZING THE ELITE CONCEPT: METHODS OF ELITE IDENTIFICATION

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The imprecision of the elite concept implies that widely differing strategies are used for identifying elites. The crucial question of how to identify the elite has to be answered at the outset of any empirical elite study. This is not a problem for studies of specialized elites who are defined by their membership in a clearly defined body, for example, a parliament or the executive board of an organization. If an entire elite formation is to be studied, however, both the vertical and horizontal boundaries of the elite have to be specified at the outset.

Three basic methods of elite identification are available, the reputational method, the decisional method, and the positional method (Parry 2005; Putnam 1976, 15 ff.). These methods were originally developed for studying community elites. The *reputational method* relies on experts who are asked to name the most powerful individuals in the community or other political system. A classic example of this method is Hunter's study *Community Power Structure* (1953). Hunter started out by

drawing comprehensive lists of leaders who were selected on the basis of their formal positions or were nominated by representatives of local organizations. At the next stage, experts were asked to select the most influential leaders from these lists. It is obvious that the validity of this method depends primarily on the choice of the experts and their knowledge of the actual influence of different elite actors. At the local level, especially in small and medium-sized communities, this is an inexpensive method of identifying community influentials.

The reputational method is of limited value, however, in complex settings with a multiplicity of decision-making arenas. Knowledge of who the consequential actors are is here necessarily limited to the participants in the different decision-making arenas. A large number of experts for different policy domains would therefore be needed to produce a comprehensive list of influentials. In a society with a pluralist power structure, such an approach would therefore imply that the identification of relevant actors becomes an elite study in its own right. In his later study *Top Leadership U.S.A.* (1959), Hunter applied the reputational method to the national level. This attempt drew a lot of criticism, however, because of the arbitrary ways of choosing experts and influentials.

Starting out with an analysis of documents and interviews, the *decisional method* identifies elites by studying the decision-making process for important policy issues. It considers the most consequential actors as belonging to the elite. This method was originally developed for studying local elites. Dahl's study *Who Governs?* on the local power structure of New Haven (1961) is a classic example. The validity of this method depends primarily on the choice of the policy issues used for determining the influential actors. If the sample of issues does not cover all important policy domains, this method provides an incomplete picture of the overall elite structure and will miss important actors with specialized influence. Moreover, critics have emphasized that the method tends to ignore influentials who are not actively involved in policy making, but whose preferences are taken into account by the decision makers.

Like the reputational method, the decisional method is primarily useful for identifying local elites. It is obvious that the structural complexity of national policy making cannot be adequately captured by studying who is involved in the decision making on a limited set of issues. It has been successfully applied, however, for studying elites in well-defined policy domains by Laumann and his associates (Laumann and Knoke 1987; Knoke et al. 1996).

The *positional method* of elite identification, finally, is customarily used for studying national elites, but it can be equally well applied to smaller settings. It is based on the assumption that in modern societies power and influence are tied to the resources associated with positions of leadership in public institutions and private organizations of national relevance.

The positional method starts out from the formal structure of authority. It implies several steps. In a first step, relevant sectors are defined. Politics, public administration, business, pressure groups, media, and academia belong to the sectors that are mostly considered as being of primary importance. The next step involves the decision on the most important institutions/organizations within these sectors. They are

determined according to sector-specific criteria (e.g. political decision-making authority, organizational membership, capital turnover). The third step involves the identification of top leadership positions within each of these organizations, and the present incumbents of these positions are eventually selected as constituting the elite.

The application of the positional approach is highly formalized and does not require much previous research. Its reliability is rather high, too, as there is a high degree of convergence among scholars on which institutions and organizations are the most powerful. Virtually all major comprehensive studies of national elites have therefore used this method for identifying elites (Australia: Higley, Deacon, and Smart 1979; Germany: Zapf 1965, Hoffmann-Lange 1992 and Bürklin et al. 1997; USA: Barton 1985 and Dye 2002; Denmark: Christiansen, Møller, and Togeby 2001; Russia: Lane and Ross 1999).

This method has one serious drawback, however. It does not provide any guidelines for specifying the boundaries of an elite. The researcher is free to decide on the horizontal (inclusion of sectors and organizations) and the vertical (hierarchical levels within organizations) boundaries. For determining the size of an elite sample, the availability of funding is mostly more important than theoretical considerations.

Regardless of the choice of sample size, the positional method yields a sample of individuals who control important power resources. It allows us to compare the characteristics of different elite subgroups within the overall elite sample. Since it does not provide information on the relative importance of organizations and positions, however, the method does not warrant the aggregation of results across different elite sectors. Inferences about “*the elite*” have to be made with caution, since the marginals for individual variables depend on the composition of the elite sample, especially with respect to characteristics for which substantial differences exist between elite subgroups.

The scholarly dispute over the validity of the different methods of elite identification is closely intertwined with conceptual differences. Scholars claiming that modern societies are characterized by a pluralist power structure tend to use either the decisional or the positional method, while scholars who believe in the existence of a highly integrated *power elite* tend to rely on the reputational method.

Using data from a community power study in a medium-sized West German city, Pappi (1984) demonstrated that these methodological and substantive differences have an empirical basis. He found that perceptions of political influence tend to be highly skewed in favor of a small number of key decision makers, while both the positional and the decisional method yield a more inclusive, pluralist elite structure that reflects the diversity of power resources.

Ultimately, each of these methods focuses on different aspects of the structure of power and influence with respect to two dimensions:

- control of power resources attached to leadership positions and
- active involvement in (political) decision making.

A combination of these two dimensions yields four different possible strategies for identifying elites (Table 49.1). It is obvious that limiting the analysis to individuals with formal political decision-making authority yields the most restrictive definition of positional elites. Elite studies using the positional method usually extend the elite concept with respect to the second dimension and include elites drawn from a broad spectrum of powerful public institutions and private organizations with potential influence on strategic policy decisions. The decisional method, on the other hand, disregards potential influence and limits the analysis to individuals who are actively involved in political decision making, regardless of the resources on which their influence is being based.

The reputational method, finally, is the most inclusive in terms of the power resources and the degree of active involvement considered. At the same time this method is also more exclusive than the other methods and usually yields a much smaller number of powerful individuals. This is due to both methodological and substantive reasons. Methodologically, the size of lists with names of influentials has to be kept manageable and is therefore limited. No single expert will be able to pick influentials from a list of more than about 200 individuals. Theoretically, assuming the existence of one overarching elite whose members are involved in most or all major (political) decisions implies a focus on individuals at the very top of society and disregards individuals with only specialized influence.

Faced with these choices, some scholars have combined different methods. Several studies have started with a positional approach and then complemented the initial list of position-holders by asking respondents for other elites who were either actively involved in political decision making or were considered as influential by the positionally defined elites (e.g. Laumann and Pappi 1976; Pappi 1984). Such a hybrid approach is even possible within the context of large-scale national elite surveys. In a comparative study of US, Australian, and (West) German national elite networks, respondents identified by the positional method were asked to name other actors

**Table 49.1** Positional, Reputational, and Decisional Methods of Elite Identification

Resources of power and influence	Involvement in political decision-making	
	Active involvement in political decision making	Active involvement <b>plus</b> (indirect) political influence
Positional power resources: Formal decision-making authority within organizations	Positional Method: Political decision makers only	Positional method: Political decision makers plus incumbents of top leadership positions in influential organizations
Positional power resources <b>plus</b> influence based on personal prestige	Decisional method: Influential political actors, regardless of their formal decision-making authority	Reputational method: all influentials whose preferences are taken into account in political decision making

with whom they regularly interacted (Higley et al. 1991). While most of the actors mentioned by the respondents were themselves holders of top elite positions, this method also yielded the names of additional elites who had not been included in the initial elite sample.

### 3 METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

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#### 3.1 Studying Elite Circulation and Changes in Elite Backgrounds with Published Data Sources

Collecting data from published sources is relatively inexpensive. Such handbook data are usually the only source for studying historical elites as well as elites in non-democratic settings.<sup>2</sup> However, scholars relying exclusively on published materials are limited to studying elites who are included in elite rosters such as handbooks of political institutions, major economic organizations, academic institutions, or the Who's Who. This is usually the case for government ministers, members of parliaments, board members of large corporations, business associations or labor unions, university professors, etc. Among these, MPs are the elite group for which the most reliable handbook information is available, dating all the way back to the mid-nineteenth century.

Handbooks usually provide basic information on the socio-demographic characteristics of elites such as year and place of birth, family background, education, religion, family status, and careers. However, since these publications list only the information provided by the elites themselves, they are necessarily incomplete with respect to career patterns or membership in private organizations which the elites do not wish to disclose to the public.

The first systematic elite study of historical elites was done by a student of Pareto, Marie Kolabinska (1912), who attempted to corroborate Pareto's theory of elite circulation and his famous dictum that history is a cemetery of elites. Since then, only a few other longitudinal studies have systematically collected information on the historical development of national elites. Among these, the studies of Christiansen, Møller, and Togeby (2001) on Danish elites and by Zapf (1965) on German elites are noteworthy. Both projects studied elites in a variety of sectors, among them politics, public administration, judiciary, military leaders, business associations, major industrial and financial companies, labor unions, churches, media, and universities. They provided comprehensive portrayals of continuity and change in the elites of these two

<sup>2</sup> A volume edited by Best and Becker (1997) provides an overview of elite research in the Soviet Union and several East European countries. Additionally, two longitudinal studies of the former East German elite should be mentioned (Meyer 1991; Schneider 1994).



countries. The Danish study included a large number of elites at three points in time (1932:  $n=605$ ; 1963:  $n=753$ ; 1999:  $n=1,771$ ). The German study was smaller, including data on some 250 elite positions and it also covered a shorter period (1919 to 1961). It is unique, however, because it combined an analysis of elite circulation in these elite positions over the entire period with a comparison of the social characteristics of the holders of these positions at three different points in time (1925, 1940, and 1955).

Thomas Dye's study of American elites which the author has continuously updated since its first edition in 1976 is another comprehensive study on elite backgrounds, including data on some 7,000 elites from all major sectors of US society.

While these studies were limited to single countries, the comparative *EurElite* project has collected data on parliamentarians in a large number of European countries. Although originally based on individual data, these data have been aggregated for the purpose of analysis into a three-dimensional data set, the so-called *data cube*. This contains background variables (age, gender, education, political and professional background, previous parliamentary experience), organized by party family per country and election year. Even though the data set includes only a small number of variables, it shows that such a data collection may yield major insights into long-term changes in the composition of European parliamentary groups. The first volume, written by a multinational team of scholars and based on data from eleven European countries for the period since the mid-nineteenth century (Best and Cotta 2000) traces the precipitous decline in the parliamentary representation of the traditional nobility and agricultural interests as well as the increasing

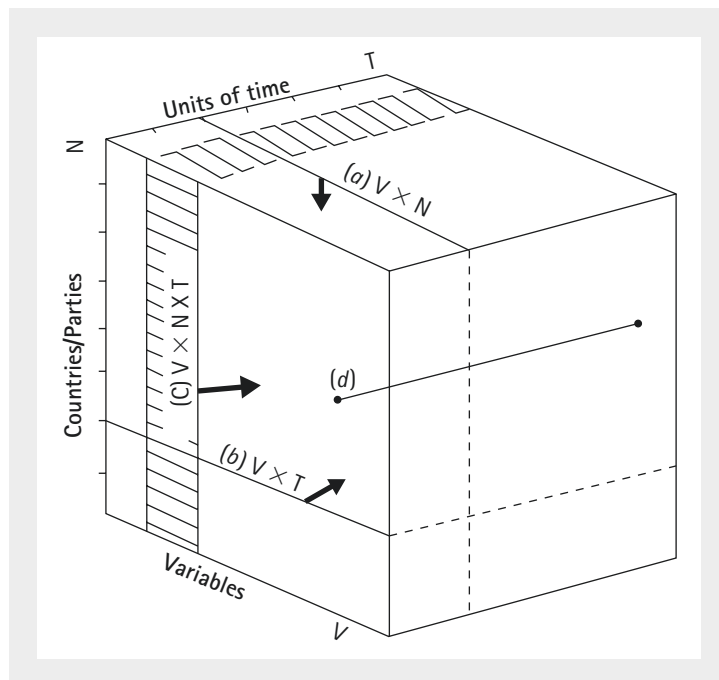


Fig. 49.1 The EURELITE Data Cube

professionalization of parliamentary groups over the last 150 years. Additional volumes are in the making, and more countries have joined the project in recent years, bringing the total number of countries up to seventeen (Best and Edinger 2005, 504)

## 3.2 Elite Research Based on Surveys

### 3.2.1 *National and comparative elite surveys*

National parliamentarians are certainly the elite group that has been most widely surveyed. Such surveys provide more detailed information on political recruitment than studies based on published sources alone. They have also considerably enlarged our knowledge about the degrees of consensus and dissensus over policy issues across political parties and countries (e.g. Norris 1997).

Moreover, some studies of parliamentarians also included parallel surveys of the electorate, thus making it possible to study political representation by comparing the political attitudes of parliamentarians and voters. Based on the seminal article by Miller and Stokes on "Constituency influence in Congress" (1963), representation studies following their theoretical and empirical approach were conducted in several European democracies, among them France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden (cf. Miller et al. 1999). These and other representation studies have greatly contributed to enhance our understanding of the theoretical puzzles associated with the comparison of elite and mass attitudes (cf. Klingemann, Stöss, and Weßels 1991).

Candidates and deputies for the European Parliament and the national parliaments were the focus of a large comparative survey in ten EU member countries in 1994. This study also gathered comparable attitudinal data on voters and thus allowed study of elite-voter congruence both at the European and the national level as well as within individual parties and party families (Schmitt and Thomassen 1999; Katz and Weßels 1999).

Only a few studies have studied representation by extending the focus to a broader range of elite groups (Hoffmann-Lange 1992; Bürklin et al. 1997; Verba et al. 1987). Limiting the study of political representation to comparisons of parliamentarians and voters, however, ignores the influence of other elites on political decision making. While political elites are certainly of central importance, network analysis has revealed that other public and private sector elites enjoy direct access to political decision making. Middle-level elites and voters play a much lesser role. This is all the more important since the available elite surveys provide ample evidence that the political party affiliations of elites are skewed in favor of conservative parties. By not taking into account the preferences of other elite groups in representation studies, such studies may therefore overestimate the actual influence of ordinary voters and produce an unrealistic portrayal of the process of representation.

Comprehensive national elite surveys have been relatively rare. Table 49.2 shows the major surveys of national elites that have included elites from at least five sectors (politics, public administration, business, labor unions, media) and interviews with

Table 49.2 Major National Elite Surveys

Country	Year	Number of Respondents	Reference
Australia	1975	370	Higley, Deacon, and Smart 1979
Brazil	1972–3	259	McDonough 1981
Estonia <sup>a</sup>	1994–2003	271–313	Steen 1997; Steen 2005
European Union <sup>b</sup>	1996	3,778	Spence 1996
Finland	1991	746	Ruostetsaari 1992
Finland	2001	687	Ruostetsaari 2006
(West) Germany	1968	808	Hoffmann-Lange 1992
(West) Germany	1972	1,825	Hoffmann-Lange, Neumann, and Steinkemper 1985
(West) Germany	1981	1,744	Hoffmann-Lange 1992
Germany	1995	2,341	Bürklin et al. 1997; Welzel 2000
Latvia <sup>a</sup>	1993–2003	280–300	Steen 1997
Lithuania <sup>a</sup>	1993	307–333	Steen 1997
Norway	2000	1,710	Gulbrandsen and Engelstad 2005
Russia <sup>c</sup>	1998–2000	605–980	Steen 2003; Gel'man/Steen 2003
South Africa <sup>d</sup>	2002	566	Kotzé/Steyn 2003
Sweden	2001	1,779	Göransson (forthcoming)
United States	1972	545	Barton 1985
United States	1979–85	1,861	Lerner, Nagai, and Rothman 1996
United States	1979		Verba and Orren 1985

<sup>a</sup> The Baltic elite studies included three (Lithuania) and four (Estonia and Latvia) consecutive waves of face-to-face interviews during the period between 1993 and 2003. The number of respondents varied within the range reported in the table.

<sup>b</sup> The EU study of 1996 was conducted in the 15 member states and included from 71 (Luxembourg) to 475 (Germany) respondents. This telephone survey was largely limited to gathering information on the respondents' attitudes towards European integration and world politics. Apart from these questions, only a few demographic and attitudinal indicators (sex, age, age at completing education, left-right orientation) were included in the questionnaire.

<sup>c</sup> The Russian elite study consisted of two waves of face-to-face interviews, 980 in 1998 and 605 in 2000.

<sup>d</sup> This survey was part of a larger comparative elite study in several African countries (South Africa, Nigeria, Senegal, Kenya, Algeria, Uganda, Zimbabwe). However, the elite samples in the other African countries were rather small and included only 97 to 140 respondents.

more than 250 respondents. It is obvious from the table that the number of national elite surveys, while still relatively small, has increased in recent years. Moreover, while the first studies were mostly limited to small sample sizes, some of the more recent studies have included larger numbers of elite respondents. For the purpose of comparing subgroups within the elite samples, studies with larger sample sizes are of course much better suited.

With the exception of the surveys in the three Baltic countries, these studies were limited to single countries, however. Even though they have mostly relied on the positional method for identifying elites, the investigators employed different criteria for the numerical representation of elite sectors and for selecting organizations within the sectors. Some have included small sectors, that is, leaders of protest groups and NGOs, church leaders, military leaders etc., while others were limited to the above-mentioned major sectors. The comparability of results is also hampered by the fact that the questionnaires included only a few equivalent questions. It is therefore difficult to compare the social characteristics and attitudes of the different national elites even for basic indicators such as social-class background and education, let alone role perceptions, value orientations, and political attitudes.

To date, only three truly comparative elite surveys have been conducted. The TEEPS survey by Lerner and Gorden (1969) encompassed five successive waves of elite interviews in Britain, France, and Germany from 1955 to 1965, with a total of 4,000 interviews. The authors were primarily interested in studying elite perceptions on the role of Europe in the world, foreign policy attitudes, and support for European integration. Unfortunately, the book does not provide much information on the composition of the elite samples, except for listing the number of interviews by year and country and mentioning that the elites were determined by the reputational method. The book focuses on cross-country differences, not on differences between elite groups within countries.

The second comparative elite survey was conducted in the early 1970s. It was limited to elites from just two sectors, politics and public administration (Aberbach, Putnam, and Rockman 1981). Six western European nations (Britain, France, West Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Sweden) and the US were included in the study which was conducted by a team of scholars at the University of Michigan. Elites were defined by the positional method. The sample of respondents included parliamentarians, senior bureaucrats, and younger administrators, so-called bureaucratic high-fliers. The book discusses the differences in the social backgrounds, role perceptions, value orientations, and policy attitudes between the two elite groups.

A third comprehensive elite survey sponsored by the European Commission and carried out in 1996 included elite respondents from a variety of sectors in the fifteen EU member countries. This study was based on telephone interviews with altogether 3,778 respondents (Spence 1996). Unfortunately, the questionnaire was mostly limited to asking for the respondents' attitudes towards European integration and world politics, while only a few demographic and attitudinal indicators were

included (sex, age, age at completing education, left-right-orientation). The data are therefore of limited use for academic purposes.

### 3.2.2 *Methodological Problems*

The small number of comparative elite studies and the limited sample sizes of most national elite surveys attest to the difficulties involved in doing such surveys. They involve a lot more work and are more expensive than general population surveys. Identifying an elite sample by using the positional method requires prior research into the organizational and positional structure of the national political system before a list of elite positions can be drawn up and the current incumbents of these positions can be identified. Moreover, contacting the elites, making appointments, and actually conducting the interviews is more difficult. The elites' tight schedules leave little time for interview appointments, and even after appointments have been set up, times are frequently changed due to unforeseen events.

Once one overcomes these difficulties, however, response rates are about the same for elite surveys as for general population surveys. They have been relatively low in Germany and Finland with 55 to 60 percent, while the Norwegian elite survey reached a very high response rate of 87.3 percent (cf. Gulbrandsen and Engelstad 2005, 903).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, response rates are apt to vary considerably across sectors. They are mostly relatively high in the political sector, in the public administration, and in the media, but considerably lower among business elites (cf. Hoffmann-Lange 1987, 36; Ruostetsaari 2006).

Elite respondents are generally cooperative and do not mind answering even highly structured questionnaires. Missing values are mostly lower and the data quality higher than for general population surveys (cf. Lerner and Gorden 1969, 411 ff).

Most of the national elite surveys conducted so far have used personal interviews. Mail questionnaires are relatively rare for this type of study. The two Finnish elite surveys as well as a survey of EP candidates show, however, that mail surveys of elites can be successfully conducted and may even produce satisfactory response rates. One has to keep in mind, though, that with mail surveys one cannot be absolutely sure if the elite respondents have answered the questionnaire themselves or rather asked one of their staff members to do this. While this is probably not a problem as far as hard facts are concerned (e.g. social backgrounds, career patterns), it cannot be ruled out that this method may produce biased results for attitudinal questions.

With the increasing popularity of telephone interviewing in public opinion research, this approach has to be considered as an additional option for elite surveys. A telephone survey of German parliamentarians conducted in 2003/4 produced a

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the Finnish elite study used mail questionnaires that normally produce much lower response rates than personal interviewing. All four of the German elite surveys involved personal interviews, instead.

satisfactory response rate of 56 percent (Best and Jahr 2006). One has to keep in mind, however, that telephone interviews require a simple question format and set limits for the available interview time. They may thus not be suitable for long and complex interview schedules.

A major problem of elite surveys is the question of protecting the anonymity of respondents. Elites are public figures and it is therefore always possible to identify individual respondents on the basis of just a few variables such as year of birth, family status, sex, type of university degree, organizational sector, and party membership. This is especially true for elite respondents with a rare combination of personal characteristics, for example, female holders of senior positions in the business elite. Even if only broad sector codes are recorded on the data set, later identification of individual respondents cannot be ruled out. Including detailed information about the organization and position of elite respondents in the data set aggravates this problem even further. At the same time, however, it also increases the options for data analysis. Recording information on the exact positions of respondents is ideal since it makes it possible to simultaneously categorize respondents according to different criteria, for example, by (sub)sector, type of position, religion, generation, and party affiliation.

It seems therefore impossible, both out of practical and theoretical reasons, to promise respondents that the data will preclude later identification of individual respondents. Instead, it is advisable to inform the respondents about this dilemma and to promise that the published tables will always be grouped in a way that will not allow such individual identification.

### 3.3 Studies of Elite Networks

From a theoretical point of view, a central question for elite research is how closely the individual elite members are connected to each other. Since the publication of C. Wright Mills's book on the *Power Elite* (1956), the controversy about the elite structure of developed democracies has never subsided. Following Mills, quite a few scholars from different countries have assumed that even modern democracies are dominated by a small power elite or ruling class (e.g. Bottomore 1993; Domhoff 1998). On the other side, theorists of elite pluralism claim that power is dispersed among a broad set of different elite sectors representing the diversity of interests in these societies (e.g. Dahl 1961; Parry 2005; Keller 1991).

Elite research has tried to come to grips with this fundamental question. However, most of the national elite studies carried out so far have primarily collected information on the individual characteristics of elites and not on relations among elites. They have therefore mostly relied on indirect indicators of elite cohesion, by referring to similar backgrounds, positional interlocks, or attitudinal similarities. Based on such results, they have either claimed that the existing similarities supported the existence of a power elite/ruling class, or instead claimed to the contrary, emphasizing the existing differences between elite sectors as indicators of a pluralist elite structure.

It is obvious that background and attitudinal data are inconclusive in this respect. Instead, network data are needed to settle this controversy. Information on elite networks can be collected in elite surveys by asking respondents for their contacts with other elites. Because of the smaller scope of local elites, such questions are easier to ask in local elite studies. Numerous community power studies in different countries provide a wealth of data on local elite networks. They have shown an enormous variation of elite structures across communities even in the same country.

One major problem in studying national elite networks is their size. They are simply too large to be covered by a single study. In order to come to grips with the problem of network size, it is necessary to limit the focus of research. Two different strategies are available for achieving such a reduction of complexity. The first strategy relies on limiting the study to ego-centered networks, an approach that has also been successfully employed in public opinion surveys. Questions on ego-centered elite networks were included in three national elite surveys carried out in the 1970s and early 1980s in the US, Australia, and West Germany (Higley et al. 1991). The elite respondents<sup>4</sup> were first asked to name the one national issue on which they had most actively attempted to influence national policy or public opinion during the preceding twelve months. This question was followed by sociometric questions asking for the names of those persons with whom they regularly interacted over this issue. Even though the network information generated by these questions is necessarily incomplete because it is based on interactions over only one issue per respondent, the sociometric analysis revealed the existence of inclusive elite networks of roughly 800 individuals in the three countries.

Within each of these elite networks, it was possible to identify a number of social circles whose members were related to each other either directly or through only a few intermediaries. One of these circles was a relatively large *central circle* made up of 227 persons in the US, 340 in West Germany, and 418 in Australia. These central circles were inclusive in terms of their sector composition, although elites from the various sectors were not equally well represented in the central circles. In all three countries, about half of the central circle members were politicians and civil service elites. Business elites accounted for another 25–30 percent, while other elite groups were less well represented. The density of the central elite circles, albeit considerably higher than the density of the overall elite network, was still less than 5 percent.

Despite the fact that the questions were limited to ego-centered sociometric data, the existence of one overarching elite network in each of the three countries is of particular theoretical relevance. It implies that both competing models of elite structures, that is, the power elite model and the pluralist model, misrepresent the actual structure of power and influence in developed democracies. The elite structures found were more integrated than the pluralist model assumes, but also

<sup>4</sup> The original sample sizes were 545 in the US 370 in Australia (see Table 49.2) and 497 in Germany. Since the overall sample of elite respondents had been much larger in Germany ( $n=1,744$ ), only a comparable subset of the German respondents holding the most senior elite positions was used for this comparative analysis.

larger and more heterogeneous than the power elite model warrants. Rather than having the *hollow core* Heinz et al. (1993) found for the network of lobbyists in the US, the center of the elite network was made up of a group of mostly senior leaders from various sectors who were simultaneously active in several policy fields and contributed to the integration of an otherwise highly pluralistic elite.

Laumann and Knoke (1987) took a different approach to studying national elite networks. Rather than limiting their focus to ego-centered sociometric data, they limited the number of relevant actors by studying the relations between collective actors (e.g. parliamentary committees, private corporations, business associations, law firms) in two policy domains (energy and health). They also used a different network model. The model of *structural equivalence* groups actors on the basis of their ties to other actors in the network (*block-model analysis*). Governmental actors occupied the center of the elite network. They were the main targets of communications initiated by other governmental (parliamentary committees, White House etc.) and private (corporations, business associations, law firms etc.) actors (1987, 377). Laumann and Knoke coined the term *organizational state* for designating this type of elite network that does not have any clear boundaries between elites from public institutions and private organizations.

In a later comparative study of labor policies in three post-industrial democracies, the US, Japan, and West Germany, Knoke et al. (1996) used the same approach. This second study confirmed the basic structural characteristics of the previous study, but also showed that the elite networks in these three nations differed in important respects. The elite network in Japan turned out to be much more tightly integrated than the network in the other two countries. The German network structure was more pluralistic and showed a relatively large number of important veto players, while the American network was highly polarized between Republicans and Democrats at the time of the surveys in the mid-1980s.

Despite the difference between the two approaches for data collection and data analysis, these studies of elite networks have confirmed the existence of integrated, yet pluralistic elite structures in highly developed democracies.

## 4 CONCLUSION

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Empirical elite research has been thriving in recent years. The available body of data has accordingly grown as well. Parliamentarians are the elite group about which we know the most, ranging from recruitment and role perceptions to value orientations and policy attitudes. The EURELITE project has collected both longitudinal and comparative data and has thereby greatly enhanced our understanding of long-term changes in the patterns of political recruitment over the past 150 years, especially the impact of gradual democratization in the European countries around the turn of the



twentieth century and the effects of the more recent transitions from industrial to post-industrial society.

Several studies on political representation, comparing parliamentary elites and voters, have provided information on the degree of attitudinal congruence across political party families and countries. To date, however, no one has managed to summarize the bewildering complexity of empirical evidence in this field.

The comparative study of entire national elite formations, finally, is still lagging far behind the progress made in other fields of elite research. A couple of studies have provided comparative evidence on the elite changes associated with the regime change in the post-communist countries (e.g. Szélenyi and Szélenyi 1995; Higley, Kullberg, and Pakulski 1996). Comparative and longitudinal elite surveys are especially needed to refute widespread criticism that elite studies are of only descriptive value and do not contribute much to answering the important theoretical questions associated with elites. Even though the descriptive value of such studies should not be underestimated, single cross-sectional studies of national elites can only provide small mosaic pieces to the puzzle of elite structures and their impact on social and political change that was the fundamental question raised by Pareto and Mosca. This unsatisfactory situation can only be overcome by systematic comparative research and by giving up the search for an overarching elite theory. Instead, it would be more promising if elite research would focus on more limited questions such as identifying the determinants of elite integration and on studying the impact of regime change on elite circulation as well as elite strategies for dealing with potentially divisive issue conflicts. Among the independent variables, prime emphasis should be given to the institutional determinants of patterns of elite interaction and their contribution to moderating conflict between different elite subgroups.

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