Elite decision making refers to a collective decision-making process that focuses on the instrumental quality of laws, public policies, and political decisions it produces. Since the process aims at producing outcomes of considerable substantive quality, it organizes the existing capacities within a political community to achieve the desired outcome, thus giving greater (or even all) political power to a small group of people (i.e., experts) who are considered to be better at producing correct political decisions. This term has been a central issue in numerous discussions for the last 2,500 years and still represents a relevant political idea because of its strong influence regarding which political system we can see as legitimate. This entry briefly introduces the rationale for elite decision making and discusses various forms elite decision making can take in democratic and nondemocratic systems. The entry concludes with a few influential objections raised against elite decision-making procedures.

Rationale for Elite Decision Making

For most citizens, most political issues are complex and remote. Citizens generally lack the relevant knowledge about nuclear energy, genetically modified organisms, or climate change, yet they recognize that these are very important issues and want to have correct laws and policies that regulate these issues. Since some citizens (experts) have the relevant knowledge, they should be authorized to rule and to make political decisions about these complex issues. Besides the relevant knowledge, Emilie Hafner-Burton, Alex Hughes, and David Victor (2013) point out that members of such a decision-making elite possess a number of other qualities and competences: experienced elites are better at risk management and less prone to loss aversion; they use heuristics more effectively when processing complex information; and they are better in strategic interaction and might even be more cooperative.

The argumentation for elite decision making rests on three premises: (1) there are correct or incorrect (good or bad) political decisions, (2) there are some people who are better at producing correct (or good) decisions, and (3) (only) those who are better at producing correct political decisions should participate in the collective decision-making process.

Elite decision-making procedures can be realized and implemented in nondemocratic but also (at least to some extent) in democratic systems.

Elite Decision Making in Nondemocratic Systems

Elite decision making can lead to epistocracy, a rule of experts in politics. Plato famously argued that the political community should be ruled by wise philosopher-kings and used the ship analogy to further support this claim. Men ignorant of navigation cannot successfully command the ship; it takes certain skills to be able to do that, and a few people (e.g., captains) have these skills. Similarly, it takes certain skills to be able to successfully command the state, and most people lack these skills. Ignorant people (those lacking the relevant skills) should not command the state just as they should not command the ship.

This argumentative strategy has been used many times throughout history, and even nowadays some (religious) citizens use it to claim that political authority comes from the understanding of God’s will (or some other comprehensive doctrine), thus ascribing all political power to their religious or ideological leaders.

Elite Decision Making in Democratic Systems
The idea that experts’ knowledge should somehow be included in the democratic decision-making process is as old as modern democracy itself. Of course, since democracy is characterized by formal equality of all citizens in the process of making and authorizing collective decisions, it is not naturally compatible with the idea that some people should, because of their expertise, have greater political power and authority. Anthony Dawns recognizes that political issues are becoming increasingly complex and that common people cannot possibly have sufficient knowledge to properly deliberate about them. His solution is a form of representative democracy, one in which citizens select their political representatives, who are then authorized to make political decisions regarding these complex issues. Similarly, Thomas Christiano argues that citizens should define key values and aims the society is to pursue, while it is the task of experts to devise means by which these aims can be achieved. Though Dawns’s and Christiano’s positions rely on experts’ competences in the decision-making process, it is important to emphasize that experts’ political authority does not come from the mere fact of their expertise (as Plato would have it) but from the fact that experts are recognized and authorized to make decisions by all members of a political community.

Objections to Elite Decision Making

Many objections have been raised against nondemocratic elite decision making: political authority simply does not follow from expertise (expert-boss fallacy), and even if it would follow, reasonable people would disagree on who the experts are, thus making it impossible to have a government of experts all could consent to.

Democratic elite decision making is able to avoid the aforementioned objections, though there are still some objections raised against it. Experts and elites are more prone to overconfidence and often tend to underestimate the contribution some nonexperts could give in solving the problem at hand. For example, in 1986, a group of British scientists had to make a prediction regarding the danger level of radioactive cesium that had been deposited by rain after the Chernobyl nuclear plant meltdown. Disregarding the advice of local shepherds, they failed to take into account several important factors (e.g., the structure of the local terrain), thus giving a wrong prediction. Furthermore, experts and decision-making elites can be subject to biases and have some epistemically latent features, especially when they come from the same social class or have the same educational background.

See also Civic and Political Knowledge and Skills; Decision Making; Elite Theory (Pareto); Judicial Review; Oligarchy; Political Deliberation

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Further Readings


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