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Democracy Embattled

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Thomas Carothers ■ Minxin Pei

Ghia Nodia ■ Andrew J. Nathan ■ Sumit Ganguly

Laura Rosenberger on This Is Not Propaganda

DEMOCRACY'S INEVITABLE ELITES

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Commentators who analyze and criticize populism—two activities that frequently go hand-in-hand—tend to presume that there is no such thing as *populist theory*. One can have a theory about populism, these analysts generally believe, but populism itself is not based on a rationally defensible vision. Populism is not a concept or an ideology, but rather an attitude, a predisposition, a discursive technique, a specific kind of resentment that demagogues exploit.

A theoretical foundation for populism can be found, however, in Robert Michels's classic work of political sociology, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy* (1911).¹ It is a text worth revisiting when democracy is—or at least is perceived to be—caught up in a crisis resulting from a backlash against the alleged elite appropriation of people's power. Michels's book is the first detailed analysis of how, in his view, such appropriation occurs. In his introduction to the 1962 English-language edition of Michels's *Political Parties*, Seymour Martin Lipset, one of the era's leading political scientists, makes clear that while countering Michels's arguments is no easy task for democrats (especially those on the left), ignoring the issues he raises is not an option.² Juan Linz, another prominent representative of that generation of democracy scholars, took Michels's points seriously enough to dedicate some of his own research to refuting them.³

Michels's main argument, known as the “iron law of oligarchy,” holds that modern mass democracy is a smokescreen for oligarchy (or,

as he sometimes writes, aristocracy). This is not about intentional deceit: Michels was not describing what today's commentators call "façade democracy," where autocrats are keen to keep up democratic appearances even while deliberately and systematically undermining democratic institutions. Rather, the path toward oligarchization as described by Michels is something that no modern democracy can avoid, regardless of its leaders' personal attitudes toward core democratic principles. In modern societies, democracy is doomed to become oligarchy.

There are at least two reasons why this is so. The first is rooted in the very nature of the people, or the masses. The idea of democracy is that the people rule, but most people lack the knowledge and judgment necessary in order to make good political decisions. Moreover, most people are naturally passive and prefer to be led rather than to assume responsibility for decision making. People who have the competence and skills of natural leaders are few and far between, and the masses are predisposed to accept their leadership.

A second reason lies in the nature of organization. The masses cannot effectively function as a single body. They cannot quickly make and carry out decisions. Therefore, the multitude has to delegate these crucial functions to leaders and to trust that they will act in its best interest. But having done that, the people cannot possibly exert effective control over their delegates. The leaders naturally acquire an interest in keeping their positions of power, and they are smart enough to manipulate the masses into allowing the elites to have their way. Moreover, the very fact of occupying positions of power brings about a change in people's mindsets and lifestyles (even if their basic ideological convictions remain the same), and this widens the mental and cultural gap between the rulers and the ruled. As a result, the elites who are charged with representing the interests and aspirations of the masses can never truly do so.⁴

As its title suggests, Michels's book is primarily about political parties. Michels (1876–1936) infers his "iron law" from empirical observations of socialist political parties in Europe—the parties which were then most outspoken in their claims to act on behalf of the masses. Michels demonstrates rather convincingly how these parties came to be effectively dominated by small, self-interested, and fairly stable groups of leaders. He also, more questionably, appears to believe that conclusions about the nature of democracy in general may be extrapolated from his findings. How Michels makes the logical jump from the oligarchization of party life to the oligarchization of the democratic system as a whole is not altogether clear, but he obviously believes that the one implies the other.

Modern democracy's legitimacy is based on a claim that its institutional framework enables the average person to be in charge. But, Michels reminds us, the role of the "little guy" in practice is rather modest:

He or she can only choose from a very limited menu of options provided by the elites, and the chances that any single vote will be decisive even in this regard are minuscule. The only way for an ordinary citizen to gain influence is by joining with like-minded persons to create an organization; but, according to Michels, this will ultimately prove futile, since such organizations themselves are bound to fall under the domination of elites. These elites may succeed (at least for a time) in creating the appearance that they are acting for the people, but in reality this is not and cannot be the case.

Democratic Disillusionment

Michels's ideas may best be understood in the context of his biography. He started his career as a committed socialist, an active member of the German Social Democratic Party. Perusing *Political Parties* leaves little doubt that, though he had quit the party by the time of its writing, he still believed in the main tenets of Marxist doctrine: namely, that the proletariat was unfairly exploited by the bourgeoisie, and therefore the interests of the two classes were objectively opposed. Michels's normative idea of democracy was primarily about representing and defending the interests of the exploited "little guy" on the political level. The one-time Social Democrat became disillusioned with socialist parties that failed to represent the true interests of the working classes, not with socialist ideas per se. Similarly, although he grew disappointed with the existing institutions of liberal democracy, he did not reject what he believed to be the core idea of democracy: that the political regime should serve the people (understood chiefly as the underprivileged). While Michels is often considered a representative of what scholars call "elite theory" (a social-scientific viewpoint emphasizing the dominance of elites), an *elitist* he was not.⁵

But what can a disappointed democrat do if he finds out that his political ideal is unrealistic? At the end of *Political Parties*, Michels, somewhat despairingly, reiterates his commitment to the idea of democracy: "In continuing our search [for democracy], in laboring indefatigably to discover the undiscoverable, we shall perform a work which will have fertile results in the democratic sense."⁶ Yet if we accept Michels's arguments, this would seem to be a Sisyphean task, and remaining committed to such an unrewarding endeavor would hardly have been easy. We know that Michels eventually changed his mind about democracy: He joined the Italian National Fascist Party, became a fan of Benito Mussolini, and never renounced his faith in the Italian dictator. This was in some ways a logical result of the sociologist's disappointment with what he saw as modern democracy's inherent trend toward bureaucratic elitism. If the oligarchies that are the natural end stage of democratic institutions cannot properly represent

the interests of the common people, somebody else must do so. This “somebody” could well be a charismatic leader who despises elites, along with the representative institutions that sustain them, and who claims a direct connection to the people. Apparently, Michels felt that Mussolini fit the bill.

Is Modern Liberal Democracy Hypocritical?

Even though Michels did not use the term “populism,” his critique of liberal democracy offers a foundation for populist politics. When he criticizes the institutional structure of modern democracy, he does not do so from a conservative or a liberal-elitist perspective. Rather, he condemns this structure for failing to represent the interests and aspirations of the little guy—precisely the problem that populists claim to be tackling. Michels is usually not described as a “populist,” however. One explanation for this may be that the term, though already in circulation when *Political Parties* was published, was more widely used in the United States than in Europe. Moreover, as we have noted, applying the term “populist” to works of political theory, as opposed to political movements or leaders, is relatively uncommon.

Populism is, in part, a reaction to what populists perceive as the fundamental hypocrisy on which modern democracy is based. The rhetorical promise of democracy (whose modern progenitors, after all, borrowed a Greek term literally meaning “the rule of the people”) is that each citizen is entitled to rule. But in reality, Michels argues, this does not and cannot possibly happen.

This criticism of modern democracy rests on a significant assumption. The normative ideal to which contemporary populism (as well as Michels) openly or tacitly appeals is that of *direct* democracy—the only mechanism that would seem to be capable of fully satisfying the demand to give “power to the people.”⁷ If this is our ideal, we may accept the mechanism of representative democracy only reluctantly, viewing it as a technical necessity that stems from the impossibility in modern societies of personally involving every individual in the tasks of governance. Modern societies, being large and complicated, need people (such as politicians and bureaucrats) with specific technical expertise who are devoted to these tasks full-time. According to this logic, the distance that representation creates between the average citizen and the decision-making process (as well as the people involved in the latter) is normatively undesirable, even if it is unavoidable in practice.

But even if we agree that representative (as opposed to direct) democracy leads to alienation of the people from the everyday practice of governance, and that this is objectionable, there is still room for disagreement about how bad it is. The prevalent view among people who practice and discuss democracy has been that, while the problem might

be real, it can be addressed in a satisfactory manner by supplementing elections with additional forms of democratic participation. By contrast, Michels and contemporary populists alike believe that the gap between the people and their government constitutes a fundamental betrayal of democracy's promise. On a theoretical level at least, this is one of the core disagreements between populists and "mainstream democrats."

If we accept Michels's view that elite appropriation is an insurmountable problem in democratic systems, what options does this leave us? We can quietly reconcile ourselves to this reality with the thought that democracy, though flawed, is still better than the alternatives. We can cynically keep up the appearance of "people power," but stick to "politics as usual" when it comes to how important decisions are made. Populists denounce this attitude as hypocritical at best, and a vicious conspiracy against the people at worst.

The alternative is to openly recognize the sad reality of the "iron law of oligarchy" but to refuse to reconcile ourselves to it, instead "continuing our search" for "true democracy." Populism may be defined as the choice to follow this latter path. Such a quest to "discover the undiscoverable," as Michels puts it, may lead us to solutions that are more mystical than rational. In particular, many populists have found such a solution in the form of an individual leader who shares the people's main passion: hatred of the oligarchy, or of elites in general. For Michels, that leader was Mussolini; for some U.S. voters in 2016, it was Donald Trump. The underlying sentiments in these two cases might have been similar, though differences in national institutions and political traditions meant that the outcomes were radically different.⁸

Because Mussolini was openly critical of democracy, he is not usually called a populist. Yet when he criticized democracy, the Fascist leader had in mind the liberal parliamentary democracy usually signified by this term in the West, both in his time and today. The intellectual path that led many Italians from conventional socialism to fascism (they did not necessarily see a contradiction between those two concepts) was that of taking populism to its logical extreme: Parliamentary democracy had failed the Italian people, so a shortcut was needed. Mussolini offered such a shortcut—a direct link between the *demos* and the leadership. Until the tides turned against them in the Second World War, many Italians—probably most—agreed that Il Duce was better at representing them than Parliament with its bickering elitist parties.⁹ If Michels's quest to "discover the undiscoverable" quite logically led him to Mussolini, it was equally reasonable for the latter to show the German-born sociologist respect by bestowing on him a chair at the University of Perugia in 1928.

Thus the concerns voiced by many liberal intellectuals that popu-

lism's inherent logic may lead to something close to fascism appear to be well founded—although the original model of Italian fascism may be a better reference point than the more frequently invoked specter of Nazism.

Mind the Gap: Two Liberal Responses

Why is it that social scientists over the subsequent decades failed to follow Lipset and Linz's example in taking seriously the very real problem of elite cooptation in democracies, as formulated by Michels? One possible reason is that conditions in the West in the era following the Second World War were exceptionally conducive to the success of liberal democracy. Economies were growing rapidly, and people could appreciate the contrast between present prosperity and the earlier privations brought on by war and economic depression. The Western democracies were fairly secure under the U.S. military umbrella and were bolstered by U.S. political and economic support. Moreover, the bipolar dynamics of the Cold War presented Western publics with a sharp contrast between the free and unfree worlds, further encouraging citizens to rally around democratic values.

These conditions made it comparatively easy for people to believe that, on the whole, elites were acting in the people's best interest. The seeming triumph of the welfare-state model in public policy led many to feel that a gap between "the elites" and "the people" was no longer a major problem. The most conspicuous internal conflict to take place within Western democracies during this period—the cultural clash of the late 1960s—was in large part a generational one, and it could not be described as a clash between elites and the people. Indeed, it was the youthful rebels who were more likely to have come from an elite background.

Conditions today are very different. A rising populist wave has shaken the consensus around liberal and democratic values in developed Western societies.¹⁰ Yet while populism undoubtedly poses grave threats to liberal democracy, simply condemning it will do little to diminish these threats. To deal with them in earnest, democracies must face the root causes of populism—and contrary to what some commentators seem to believe, not all these factors lie in increased economic inequality. Rather, populism's causes are to be found in the very nature of modern representative democracy. For this reason, contemporary analysts would be well advised to take Michels' arguments seriously.

The recent surge in populism forces us to recognize that the tension between direct and representative democracy has become a central theoretical issue. Faced with growing disenchantment with representative institutions, we should ask: Are these institutions a necessary evil at best, undesirable but technically unavoidable in large and complex soci-

eties; or, on the contrary, are they an indispensable mechanism for making democracy not only effective but also liberal? Is the gap that modern representative democracy creates between the rulers and the ruled a bug or a feature?

The traditions flowing from the two great revolutions of the modern West, the American and the French, point in different directions on this question. One could describe the U.S. Founding Fathers as cautious and skeptical democrats. Their chief priority was having a limited and accountable government rather than a popular one. Indeed, they viewed the latter, if understood in terms of direct democracy, as suspect. The 1787 Constitution was designed to place constraints on the popular aspect of democracy, which was seen as a threat to liberty because majorities—or genuinely popular leaders acting on their behalf—may be prone to despotism. On this reading, the need to use indirect means (a choice of representatives) to consult the will of the people in a modern mass democracy is actually a blessing, of which constitutional framers should take advantage. Deliberately complex constitutional mechanisms effectively divide the will of the people by creating multiple majorities: one that elects the president, others that elect representatives to the Senate and the House of Representatives, still others that choose delegates to state-level bodies, and so forth. Hence, no single majority can claim to exclusively represent the “people’s will.” This is the only effective safeguard for the rights of individuals and of minorities.

This vision in no way implies intentional restrictions on the breadth and intensity of political participation. To the contrary, as we all know from Alexis de Tocqueville’s observations, the citizens of the early United States were notable for their high level of engagement in public life. But the vision embodied in the U.S. constitution does entail different avenues of political participation from which clashing impulses are expected to emerge, just as the different branches of government clash within the system of checks and balances. Enabling diverse forms of civic participation is another way to split up the people in their role as the sovereign of a democratic regime: Civil society, in its American or Tocquevillian form, introduces a system of checks and balances into the body of “the people” itself.

In this view, democracy’s primary advantage consists not in the general principle of the power of the people, but rather in that of *pluralism*, which mandates the creation of protected space for peaceful political competition, societal diversity, and individual freedom. And in order to make democracy safe for pluralism and freedom, a certain distance must be maintained between the rulers and the ruled. This distance also makes it easier for society to hold the government accountable and to prevent popular leaders from taking advantage of their mandate by abusing power.

Michels's book shows that this logic is rather foreign to him. As Juan Linz stresses, even though Michels later taught in the United States, he did not have a real understanding of, much less appreciation for, Anglo-Saxon political thinking.¹¹ His

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understanding was shaped instead by continental European thought, dominated by the tradition of the French Revolution. This tradition emphatically links the democratic ideals of liberty and equality to the principle of *fraternité*, brotherly solidarity that turns the people into a *corps politique* (a single collective political actor). In this conceptual framework, distance between the rulers and the ruled may be unavoidable for practical reasons, but in essence it is a vice to be overcome or at least minimized. Jean-

Jacques Rousseau provided the classic if extreme statement of this view: "The moment a people gives itself representatives, it is no longer free; it no longer exists."¹² Arguably, Michels's "iron law of oligarchy" is nothing but a confirmation of Rousseau's thesis by the methods of empirical political science. If one presumes that direct democracy is essentially superior to representative democracy, Michels's views become quite difficult to refute.

The tradition inaugurated by the French Revolution gave rise to a never-ending discussion about what *fraternité*, or solidarity, really means. Most scholars agree that modern nationalism was born from the spirit of the French Revolution or (at the least) greatly strengthened by it. From this, we might surmise that the bonds of *fraternité* are predominantly those linking the members of a political nation to one another. More left-leaning descendants of the French revolutionary tradition, however, prefer the idea of a brotherhood uniting the oppressed in opposition to their oppressors; later, this concept came to be called class solidarity, and it was often explicitly set against "bourgeois nationalism."

While this debate still continues on the ideological level, it was largely resolved on the practical level in 1914 with the outbreak of the First World War. The leaders of the Socialist International found, to their dismay, that when workers faced a stark choice between the bonds of class solidarity and those of national *fraternité*, the former could not compete with the latter. This left socialist politicians with little choice but to support nationalist causes. This was also when a young Italian socialist, Benito Mussolini, decided to embrace the religion of the nation, which he tried to combine with core socialist values.

Because a preference for direct-democratic values is embedded within the tradition of the French Revolution, the threat of abuses of the people's power has been particularly vivid in places where this tradition prevailed. This prospect has frightened European liberals just as much as it once did the U.S. Founding Fathers. When the time came to build new institutions in the wake of the Second World War, however, Europe's liberals came up with a different response.

Two world wars had conclusively demonstrated that in practice the democratic "people" can mean only the nation. Faced with this reality, liberals in Europe sought to shift the center of decision making gradually away from the continent's "peoples" and toward a new transnational institution: the European Union. This had to be done carefully, because Europe's nations would not easily give up their right to govern themselves. So the designers of the new supranational body sought to nibble away at peoples' competences morsel by morsel, without the nations noticing what was going on until it was too late. This strategy appeared to work for a considerable time. Eventually, however, populist rebellions broke out.

The EU's notorious "democratic deficit" (that is, the gulf separating voters throughout Europe from decision makers in Brussels) is not merely another technical problem that can be addressed and corrected in due time: It is part of the original intent of the European framers. Although they did not state this explicitly, the architects of the European Union, much like the U.S. founders, deemed a certain distance between the rulers and the ruled to be necessary in order to keep democracy safe for individuals and minorities. In Europe, the primary means of maintaining this distance has been the division of governance tasks between national and supranational institutions. In contrast to the U.S. case, the intent to dilute popular power was concealed behind a barrage of nebulous terms such as "neo-functionalism," which presented the "distancing" features of the EU model as a nod to technical necessity rather than the expression of a distinct political philosophy.

Responding to the Rebellion

As we have seen, whatever the U.S. or European framers' intentions had been, peoples that imagine themselves as democratic wholes eventually rebel against liberal elites who seek, through various techniques, to maintain distance between themselves and the multitude. We do not yet know how far this rebellion will go or what it will bring. But it is worth considering what liberal responses may entail.

The first instinct of liberals facing the new populist wave has been to resist by all possible means the push toward strengthening direct democracy. In the wake of the 2016 Brexit referendum, often described as one of the greatest populist victories thus far, the very idea of deciding

the question of EU membership by popular vote drew broad criticism. Even though David Cameron, U.K. prime minister at the time of the vote, actively campaigned for his country to remain in the European Union, he was still widely blamed for Brexit because he had made the fateful decision to put the matter to a referendum.

This line of criticism rests on the assumption, implicit or otherwise, that popular majorities are not competent to deal with some important issues. Opinions may differ as to whether or not the referendum was the right instrument in the particular case of Brexit, though historically referendums have been a widely accepted method for making decisions that involve core issues of national identity and sovereignty. But a more general question also emerges: How far are we prepared to go in declaring the people incompetent? If the public lacks the wisdom to weigh the pros and cons of staying in the European Union, can it really be trusted to choose leaders who will make decisions on this and other important issues? Many Americans who were deeply disappointed by the election of Donald Trump indeed came close to saying that the people were not qualified to choose their own government.

It is worth noting, however, that the outcome that sparked these reactions actually had much to do with the mechanisms of *indirect* democracy: Trump lost the popular vote but still became president due to the U.S. electoral-college system, which apportions votes on the basis of state-level results. The most notorious example of democratic electoral procedures leading to catastrophe—the Nazi rise to power in 1933—was also the result of indirect democracy. When Germany’s president appointed Adolf Hitler as chancellor following protracted political turmoil, the Nazis, though the largest parliamentary party, had never won a majority in popular elections.

So, if voters are truly incompetent (as they sometimes might be), no electoral mechanism will prevent them from making fatefully wrong decisions. Rejecting referendums is not enough: The natural next step would be questioning the very idea of universal suffrage. It is still taboo to voice overt support for such a move—though that taboo may be weakening.¹³ But when liberals today fight against the spirit of direct democracy using arguments or expressing attitudes of the sort that underpinned nineteenth-century-style limited suffrage, they become susceptible to the charge of hypocrisy. In effect, they want to limit the effects of popular participation in politics without admitting that this is their goal. This creates a vicious circle: Liberals try to counter the threat of populist-driven “illiberal democracy” by veering further in the direction of what Yascha Mounk and others call “undemocratic liberalism,”¹⁴ because it removes more and more issues from the purview of popularly elected leaders.¹⁵ This, however, only further feeds and legitimizes the populist backlash.

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sues, they are smart enough to know when elites are trying to cheat voters out of the “people’s power” promised by democratic systems. This leads to anger and resentment, which in turn fuel populism. Democracy does

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not depend only on rational individuals calculating their interests: It is also sustained by democratic *passion*. The passion for direct participation in decision making is clearly real enough, and liberals underestimate it at their peril. Whether we like it or not, democratic passions are increasingly likely to attach themselves to broad popular protest movements rather than to representative institutions. These passions are crucial for dismantling autocratic and semi-autocratic regimes, and champions of democracy invariably hail them in such contexts. Yet in

established democracies, these same passions may threaten the liberal values of tolerance and diversity and erode the representative institutions that safeguard them.

It would seem that liberal democrats genuinely do not know what to do when democratic passions start to work against them. If they confront this sentiment head on, they may find themselves losing the political game not only to illiberal-democratic populists, but also to authoritarians such as Russia’s Vladimir Putin who have learned to manipulate populist rhetoric. Alternatively, liberal democrats can try to outperform identitarian right-wing populists by embracing either a left-wing form of populism or minority-based identity politics, which itself is inherently illiberal. These responses may or may not bring liberal democrats electoral success, but they certainly will erode the foundations of liberal democracy even further. The result will be a vicious circle in which right-wing populism energizes the left-wing version (in both its economic and its identitarian incarnations) and vice-versa.

Unfortunately for liberals, passion is not their strong point. Many people are moved by a passion for individual liberty, but these feelings grow strong enough to drive major political mobilizations only when people are deprived of liberty. It seems that living in a society where liberty is taken for granted greatly enfeebles the passion for freedom, and when this sentiment is thus weakened, it is no match for the passions that arise from people’s perception that they are being cheated by their elites. Liberal democrats can only rely on patience, experience, and the strength of existing liberal institutions (where they do exist, of course). In addition, to fend off the threats from illiberal populism, lib-

erals would be well advised to focus on populism's own inherent weaknesses and inconsistencies.

The Problem with Populism

Chief among these weaknesses is an inconvenient fact: Direct democracy is not only undesirable, but also impossible, a lesson that experience will teach people again and again. Popular majorities do not have the option of ruling themselves without delegating the day-to-day work of governance to somebody. If they reject representative institutions, they have to opt for an irrational bond with a charismatic leader. This may work for some time (or create the illusion of working), but it has never been effective in the long run.

In weak democracies, populist movements led by charismatic leaders may indeed bring about the collapse of representative democracy. Systems with more developed democratic institutions, however, have a much better chance of weathering populist storms. They can achieve this by carefully addressing the legitimate grievances that have generated a given populist wave, and by limiting the powers of populist leaders through a web of representative institutions. These ideas are hardly new, but there are none better.

It is also important to note that Michels's "law" of oligarchy is less iron-clad than he believed. His argument rests on two assumptions: first, that there is a uniform "people" (in his case, the "working class," whose interests are objectively defined by its social and economic position); and second, that there is a singular link between the represented *corps politique* and those who represent it. But both these assumptions are wrong. Even if Michels might have been largely right about relations between the leaderships of specific political parties and their constituencies, these findings do not extend to the relations between democratic "peoples" as a whole and their representative institutions. The findings are not transferable because both popular interests and the links that tie groups of people to their representatives are plural, not singular. Democracies do inevitably produce "oligarchies" or "aristocracies"—today we call them political elites—but these elites are never fully stable and are always subject to influence from the different groups that compete in a democratic society.

This reality will never be fully satisfactory. At any given point, certain groups will have (possibly legitimate) suspicions that "the elites" are betraying their interests, but the system does not allow the people to punish these elites. In this way, a "democratic deficit" is ingrained in the very essence of democracy, making the democratic project inherently unstable and problematic. There is no guarantee that the web of representative institutions will succeed indefinitely at keeping in check the potentially destructive passions of democratic majorities (or

excessively passionate minorities). This risk has always been present, however, and established democracies usually have managed to survive. Unwarranted panic at the rise of another populist wave will only make things worse.

NOTES

1. Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul (New York: Free Press, 1962).

2. Seymour Martin Lipset, "Introduction," in Michels, *Political Parties*, 15–39.

3. See Juan J. Linz, *Robert Michels, Political Sociology, and the Future of Democracy*, ed. H.E. Chehabi (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 2006).

4. See especially Michels, *Political Parties*, 50.

5. As one of the fathers of "elite theory," Italian political theorist Gaetano Mosca, wrote in reaction to Michels's book, the latter's position is not antidemocratic but rather "a-democratic," as it implies that any system set up as a democracy "would necessarily transform itself into an aristocracy, or, to be more precise, the domination of an organized and governing minority over the disorganized and governed majority" (see Linz, *Robert Michels*, 22).

6. Michels, *Political Parties*, 368.

7. As Linz notes, "Michels seems to indicate that he does not consider representative democracy democratic" (Linz, *Robert Michels*, 38).

8. So far, at least, this is the case; more worried commentators think that the advent of Trump may eventually lead to an effective change of political regime from democratic to authoritarian, in which case the U.S. and Italian outcomes would not be so divergent after all. See Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018).

9. Christopher Hibbert, *Mussolini: The Rise and Fall of Il Duce* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Nicholas Farrell, *Mussolini: A New Life* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2003).

10. Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, "The Danger of Deconsolidation: The Democratic Disconnect," *Journal of Democracy* 27 (July 2016): 5–17.

11. Linz, *Robert Michels*, 5.

12. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "On the Social Contract," in Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 199.

13. Scholar Jason Brennan, for instance, proposed limiting the electorate to those who could prove their political competence by scoring well on relevant tests. See *Against Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

14. Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

15. Marc F. Plattner, "Illiberal Democracy and the Struggle on the Right," *Journal of Democracy* 30 (January 2019): 5–19.