

GAETANO MOSCA

Elite Rule, Political Organization, and Liberal Constitutional Government

A Systematic Guide to the Political Class, Political Formula, Juridical Defense,
and the Contemporary Structure of Power

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VISUAL OVERVIEW



GAETANO MOSCA: ELITE, POWER, AND LIBERAL CONSTITUTIONAL GOVERNMENT

Mosca (1858–1941)

- Italian political thinker and founder of modern elite theory.
- Professor of Political Science at the University of Rome.
- Wrote during a period of nation-building, social conflict, and the rise of mass politics in Europe.

Historical Context

- Italy's unification (1861) and the formation of the modern state.
- Expansion of suffrage and the rise of mass parties and trade unions.
- Anxiety of elites about socialism, revolution, and the "mob."
- Search for a scientific understanding of political order and stability.

Major Works

The Ruling Class (La classe politica), 1896

- His masterpiece.
- Argues that every society is ruled by a minority.
- Introduces the concepts of political class, ruling class, organized minority, and unorganized majority.

Elementi di scienza politica, 1896

- Systematic exposition of political science.
- Explores the nature of the state, law, government, freedom, and institutions.
- Defends liberal constitutional government as the best way to limit power.



1 CORE CONCEPTS



Political Class: All those who participate in politics and who may aspire to govern.

Ruling Class: The minority that actually holds and exercises political power.

Organized Minority: A relatively small group that is cohesive, disciplined, and coordinated.

Unorganized Majority: The large mass of people who are not politically organized and do not participate in governing.

Why an Organized Minority Rules a Larger Majority

Organizational Capacity	Information Advantage	Leadership	Resources	Institutional Control	Networks	Elite Cohesion
Elites are organized, disciplined, and coordinated; the masses are dispersed and uncoordinated.	Elites control information flows and interpretation of events.	Elites supply leaders who make decisions and mobilize support.	Control over economic resources and mobilization of politics.	Elites control the state apparatus, law, bureaucracy, military, and education.	Dense networks of patronage, alliances, and social ties maintain unity.	Shared interests and solidarity reduce internal conflict and maintain unity.

The Political Formula (Formula Politica)

The set of ideas, beliefs, and values used by the ruling class to legitimize its power and secure the consent (or acquiescence) of the majority.

Religion	Nationalism	Democracy	Rule of Law	Socialism	Popular Sovereignty
Divine right of kings; "God's will" legitimates rule (e.g., medieval Europe, the Vatican State).	The nation above all; loyalty to the nation justifies authority (e.g., 19th-century nation-states).	Rule of the people, by the people, for the people (e.g., modern liberal democracies).	Government by law, not by arbitrary will (e.g., constitutional states).	Equality and collective ownership rule in the name of the working class (e.g., socialist states).	Ultimate authority resides in the people as a whole (e.g., republican ideas).

These formulas adapt to time and place, but the function remains the same: to justify the rule of the minority.

2 THEORETICAL STRUCTURE

Composition of the Ruling Class
Not a closed caste by nature, but a minority with superior political qualities (organization, intelligence, energy, moral qualities).

Recruitment and Social Mobility
Elites are recruited from within society based on ability, wealth, or service. Openness allows new talents to enter.

Reproduction and Heredity
Elites tend to reproduce themselves through family, education, and control of opportunities.

Openness, Closure, and Replacement
A degree of openness is necessary. When elites become excessively closed, they lose vitality and become incapable of governing.

Rigidity, Corruption, and Crisis
Closed elites become rigid, corrupt, and self-serving, leading to loss of legitimacy, social unrest, and possible collapse.

Political Collapse
When legitimacy disappears and the ruling class cannot adapt or be replaced peacefully, revolutions or breakdowns may occur.



Why Mosca Defended Liberal Constitutional Government

Because no single group should monopolize power. Institutions such as:



JURIDICAL DEFENSE



LIMITED GOVERNMENT



SEPARATION OF POWERS



PARLIAMENTARY INSTITUTIONS



RULE OF LAW

create a system of balanced powers and competing institutions that restrain one another and protect individual freedom.

Mosca's Critique of Democracy

- Formal equality does not mean real equality.
- Majorities can be manipulated by elites.
- Democracy does not eliminate rule by a minority; it only changes the composition of the ruling class.
- Masses are unorganized and politically passive.

Mosca's Defense of Liberalism

- Accept the inevitability of elites.
- Limit their power through law and institutions.
- Protect individual rights and pluralism.
- Encourage competition among groups and parties to prevent tyranny.

3 COMPARISON WITH MAJOR THINKERS

	Mosca (Elite Theory)	Vilfredo Pareto (Circulation of Elites)	Robert Michels (Iron Law of Oligarchy)	Max Weber (Bureaucracy & Legitimacy)	Karl Marx (Ruling Class Theory)	Antonio Gramsci (Hegemony)	C. Wright Mills (Power Elites)	Robert Dahl (Pluralism)
Principal Holders of Power	Ruling minority (the political class)	Elites (ruling and non-ruling)	Leaders of organizations	Bureaucracy, political leaders, and elites	Bourgeoisie (owners of the means of production)	Ruling class + intellectuals (hegemonic bloc)	Corporate, military, political elites (power elite)	Multiple groups competing
Foundations of Power	Organization, political control, cohesion, ideology	Skills, cunning, political, residences, and derivations	Organizational structure and control of party apparatus	Authority (traditional, rationalistic, legal-rational); bureaucracy	Economic ownership and control of production	Cultural leadership and consent (hegemony)	Interlocking positions in key institutions	Resources, organization, plural competition
Mechanisms of Elite Replacement	Openness allows new elements; replaced through mobility or crisis	Circulation: elites replace one another	Leaders become oligarchic; limited replacement	Bureaucratic career, merit, and appointment	Class struggle and revolution; proletarian victory	War of position; intellectual and moral leadership	Internal shifts within the power elite	Elections, interest groups, competition among elites
Role of Ideology	Political formula legitimates rule	Derivations justify actions of elites	Ideology used to mobilize followers	Legitimacy of authority	Ideology reflects class interests (false consciousness)	Hegemony creates consent through ideas	Public relations and ideology maintain power	Ideas matter but no group is permanently dominant
Position of the Masses	Unorganized majority, ruled	Largely passive; manipulated	Followers; lack real control	Subjects or citizens	Proletariat exploited; potential revolutionary subject	Active in civil society when organized	Largely excluded from real power	Can influence through participation and mobilization
Evaluation of Democracy	Skeptical; inevitable elite rule; supports liberal constitution	Democracy is one form of elite rule	Democracy leads to oligarchy	Democracy needs bureaucracy and legal order	Bourgeois democracy serves class rule	Democracy can be expanded through hegemony	Illusion of democracy masks rule of power elite	Best possible system when pluralism is strong

Mosca vs. Marx: Key Difference

Mosca's Political Class

- Defined by political power, not by economic ownership.
- Includes politicians, bureaucrats, military leaders, judges, and more.
- Economic power matters, but political organization is decisive.

Marx's Ruling Class

- Defined by ownership of the means of production.
- Class position in the economy determines power.
- State is an instrument of the ruling economic class.

Mosca: Political power and economic power are often connected, but not identical. The state has relative autonomy, but elites link state power with economic advantages.

4 APPLICATIONS TO CONTEMPORARY POLITICS



Party Leadership



Bureaucracy & Civil Service



Judiciary



Military Establishments



Conglomerates & Financial Capital



Media & Big Tech



Think Tanks, Lobbyists, Professional Groups



Elections, Donors & Social Media Platforms

From Mosca's perspective, these actors form parts of the modern political class. They are organized, resource-rich, connected, and able to influence state decisions and public opinion. Even when governments change through elections, the underlying structures of power persist.

Mass Parties
Create new political elites but still hierarchical and centralized.

Populism
Challenges elites but quickly creates new leadership elites.

Digital Politics
Expands communication but platforms and data concentrations create new gatekeepers.

Polarization
Deepens divisions, strengthens identity elites on all sides.

Mosca's Insight: The forms change, but the logic of organized minority rule endures.

5 CRITICISMS AND LIMITATIONS

- Excessive Generalization**
Seen by critics as assuming elite rule is inevitable in all times and places.
- Neglect of Structural Inequalities**
Does not fully analyze class, gender, race, colonialism, and global inequality.
- Underestimates Mass Movements**
Fails to fully account for popular uprisings, revolutions, and social change.
- Limited View of Participation**
Does not adequately consider how institutions can deepen participation and accountability.
- Normative Tension**
His realism can be read as conservative or elitist, even though he supports liberal constraints on power.



6 OVERALL ASSESSMENT

Scholarly Contributions

- Power of modern elite theory.
- Clear, systematic analysis of political power.
- Insightful concept of political formula.
- Realistic understanding of how power operates.
- Defense of liberal constitutionalism and the rule of law.
- Influential on Pareto, Michels, and later sociologists.

Limitations

- Overly deterministic about elite rule.
- Insufficient attention to economic structures.
- Lacks analysis of race, gender, colonialism.
- Underestimates democratic innovations.
- May be read as justifying the status quo.

Mosca-Style Power-Analysis Checklist

- Who is the ruling minority (political class) in the society?
- What organizations, institutions, and resources do they control?
- What is their political formula for legitimizing power?
- How are elites recruited, selected, and promoted?
- Are elites open to closed to new members? Why?
- What are the relationships between political and economic power?
- What institutions link or enable elite power (concentration of power, rule of law, etc.)?
- How do elites maintain cohesion and coordinate actions?
- What are the sources of potential crisis or loss of legitimacy?
- What competing groups or forces seek to check or replace the ruling class?



AI-generated visual overview. The analytical text and cited sources in this report control where the illustration simplifies or compresses the argument.

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Executive Summary

Gaetano Mosca's central proposition is deceptively simple: in every complex society, a relatively small and organized minority governs a much larger majority. The decisive contrast is not virtue against vice, intelligence against ignorance, or wealth against poverty. It is organization against dispersion. Rulers possess command structures, information channels, institutional positions, resources, leadership, and networks that permit concerted action. Most citizens possess numbers, but numbers become politically effective only when they are organized. Mosca called the governing minority the political class or ruling class, while recognizing that effective power can extend beyond legal office to economic, professional, religious, military, and intellectual actors.

Mosca also argued that rule cannot rest on coercion alone. Ruling groups explain and justify their authority through a political formula: a socially credible doctrine such as divine right, nationalism, popular sovereignty, democracy, socialism, constitutional legality, or the rule of law. The formula helps convert organized power into legitimate authority. It is neither a purely cynical lie nor an independent cause of domination. It is a legitimating language that must fit the society's moral vocabulary and institutional structure. A political class is therefore sustained by both organization and belief.

The theory is not exhausted by the claim that oligarchy is inevitable. Mosca's mature work asks which kinds of elite rule are less arbitrary, more open to talent, more subject to criticism, and more compatible with liberty. His concept of juridical defense describes the social and institutional mechanisms that restrain rulers and protect the governed: law, rights, due process, divided powers, parliamentary discussion, freedom of expression, autonomous associations, and countervailing social forces. His mature position is best read as realist liberalism: power will never disappear, but concentrated power can be checked by other organized powers and by impersonal rules.

Applied to the present, Mosca directs attention away from election-night headlines and toward durable structures: party recruitment, senior bureaucracies, courts, military and security establishments, financial institutions, conglomerates, media organizations, technology platforms, professional credentialing systems, think tanks, lobbyists, donors, and data infrastructures. Electoral turnover can matter greatly, but it normally replaces only part of the governing minority. Institutional memory, expertise, wealth, networks, and gatekeeping capacities persist. Digital politics does not abolish elites; it often creates platform elites, algorithmic gatekeepers, influencer hierarchies, and new professional organizers.

Interpretive thesis

Mosca should not be treated either as a celebrant of oligarchy or as a democrat in the majoritarian sense. His most defensible legacy is a double realism: organized minorities are unavoidable, and liberty depends on preventing any one organized minority from absorbing all the others.

Contents

- 1. Core Concepts - life, historical context, major works, political class, organized minority, political formula
- 2. Theoretical Structure - elite composition, recruitment, openness and closure, juridical defense, democracy and realist liberalism
- 3. Comparison with Major Thinkers - Pareto, Michels, Weber, Marx, Gramsci, Mills, and Dahl
- 4. Applications to Contemporary Politics - parties, bureaucracies, courts, security, finance, media, Big Tech, professional groups, lobbying, and digital politics
- 5. Criticisms and Limitations - overgeneralization, social structure, exclusion, mass agency, and accountability
- 6. Overall Assessment - scholarly contribution, ten propositions, and a Mosca-style power-analysis checklist
- Selected Bibliography

Reading convention

Definitions describe Mosca's conceptual vocabulary. Examples are analytical applications of that vocabulary to historical or contemporary cases; they should not be confused with claims that Mosca personally analyzed every example used here.

1. Core Concepts

1.1 Life and Historical Context

Gaetano Mosca was born in Palermo on April 1, 1858, studied law at the University of Palermo, and graduated in 1881. He developed a career that combined constitutional law, political science, journalism, and public service. He taught in Palermo, Rome, Turin, and Milan; wrote regularly for *Corriere della Sera*; served in the Chamber of Deputies; held office connected with the Ministry of the Colonies; became a senator of the Kingdom of Italy; and later taught in Rome. In 1925 he signed Benedetto Croce's anti-fascist manifesto and publicly opposed measures that strengthened Mussolini's executive authority. He died in Rome on November 8, 1941 (Martinelli 2009; Bobbio 1962).

His intellectual setting was the unsettled world of post-unification Italy. The new state had formal constitutional institutions but weak integration, regional inequality, patronage, corruption, bureaucratic centralization, restricted and then expanding suffrage, mass illiteracy, socialist and Catholic mobilization, and recurring disputes over parliamentarism. Across Europe, industrialization, urbanization, organized labor, nationalism, imperial competition, and mass parties were transforming politics. Mosca wrote against two powerful abstractions: the legal formalism that inferred real power from constitutional text, and the democratic fiction that political decisions directly expressed a unified popular will.

He was also responding to the intellectual crisis of nineteenth-century liberalism. The extension of suffrage created the possibility of mass democracy, while socialism challenged private property and class hierarchy. Conservative thinkers feared disorder; democratic theorists emphasized equality and sovereignty; Marxists placed economic class struggle at the center of history. Mosca sought a more empirical political science. His question was not primarily who ought to rule, but who actually rules, how rulers organize themselves, how they justify command, how they recruit successors, and which institutional arrangements prevent power from becoming arbitrary.

1.2 Major Works: Purpose and Central Arguments

Teorica dei governi e sul governo parlamentare (1884)

Mosca's first major work attacked the assumption that parliamentary government could be understood by reading its legal forms or by accepting its democratic self-description. The book argued that beneath constitutions and electoral procedures lies an organized governing minority. Parliament does not transform the people into rulers; it creates a field in which political professionals, notables, officials, and organized interests compete. The young Mosca was sharply critical of parliamentarianism, electoral manipulation, and the distance between formal sovereignty and effective power.

Elementi di scienza politica (1896; revised 1923 and 1939)

Elementi was Mosca's systematic statement of political science. Its purpose was to identify recurring regularities in political organization across civilizations and regimes. The first edition consolidated the theory of the political class. The 1923 revision incorporated decades of observation and softened some earlier hostility toward representative institutions. Mosca retained his critique of democratic mythology but increasingly emphasized the practical superiority of liberal parliamentary government when it disperses power, permits criticism, renews the political class, and strengthens juridical defense (Martinelli 2009).

The Ruling Class (1939 English edition)

The English-language volume titled *The Ruling Class* is not a separate book written under that title in Italian. It is an edited and translated presentation of the mature *Elementi di scienza politica*, based principally on the revised edition. Arthur Livingston's edition and Hannah D. Kahn's translation introduced Anglophone readers to Mosca's theory of the ruling class, political formula, social type, juridical defense, and the organization and renewal of elites. The title encouraged later readers to assimilate Mosca to class theory, but his central category is political and organizational rather than exclusively economic.

Central distinction

The English phrase ruling class can obscure Mosca's more specific idea of *classe politica*. For Mosca, the decisive group is the minority that effectively directs the state and organized political life. Economic elites may belong to or influence this class, but wealth alone does not define it.

1.3 Political Class, Ruling Class, Organized Minority, and Unorganized Majority

Political class is the broad analytical category for those who participate directly or indirectly in the exercise of political power. In a narrow sense, it includes officeholders and senior actors in the state: ministers, legislators, party leaders, senior bureaucrats, judges, military commanders, and other officials. In a wider sense, it also includes persons outside formal office whose resources or positions give them sustained influence over public decisions, such as major financiers, media leaders, religious hierarchies, professional authorities, and intellectual organizers. Mosca sometimes used political class, governing class, directing class, and ruling class with overlapping meanings, which creates interpretive ambiguity.

Ruling class is best understood as the effective governing segment of the political class at a particular time. It is not necessarily a socially homogeneous caste. It may contain aristocrats, business leaders, lawyers, officials, military officers, party professionals, journalists, and experts. Its unity is functional rather than total: members can compete fiercely while sharing an interest in preserving the institutional arena, professional norms, or social order from which their power derives.

Organized minority identifies the structural advantage of rulers. The minority is small enough to coordinate, communicate, discipline members, allocate tasks, select leaders, punish defection, and develop a common strategy. It can act continuously rather than episodically. It occupies institutions that turn decisions into law, budgets, appointments, administration, coercion, and public communication.

Unorganized majority refers to the much larger population whose members generally lack continuous coordination and whose interests are diverse, dispersed, and sometimes contradictory. The phrase does not mean that ordinary citizens are incapable of organization, intelligence, or political action. It describes their default structural condition relative to professional rulers. When citizens form unions, parties, movements, associations, media networks, or disciplined voting blocs, they cease to be merely unorganized; they create new organized minorities and potentially supply recruits to the political class.

Why an Organized Minority Can Rule a Larger Majority

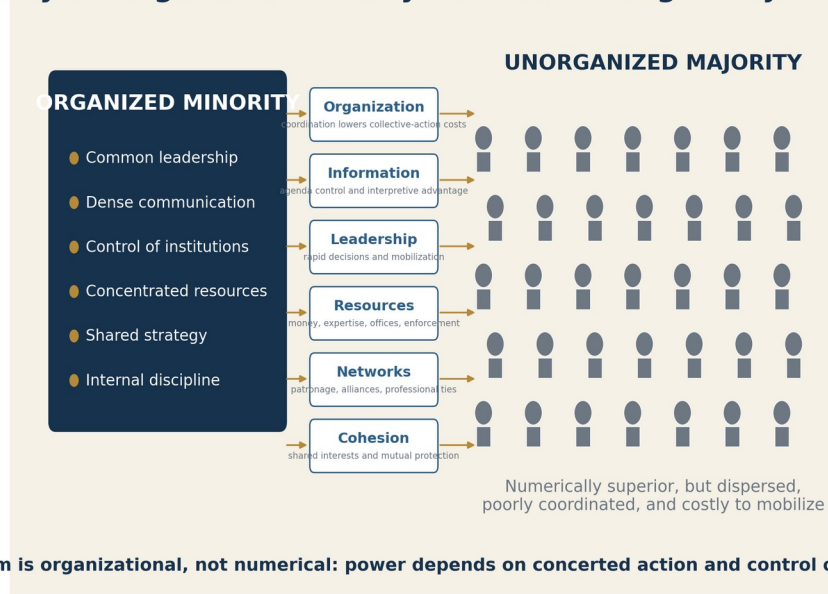


Figure 1. Mosca's organizational explanation of minority rule.

1.4 Why the Organized Minority Rules

Mosca's famous numerical contrast is a theory of collective action. A hundred coordinated actors can defeat a thousand isolated actors because the hundred possess a shared command structure while the thousand must first discover common interests, establish trust, acquire information, choose leaders, and pay the costs of mobilization. The following mechanisms specify the advantage.

- Organizational capacity: elites maintain offices, committees, chains of command, routines, budgets, schedules, and sanctions. Organization converts intention into repeated action.
- Information: governing minorities receive privileged reports, expert analysis, classified material, polling, market information, legal advice, and direct access to decision-makers. They also decide which facts enter the agenda.

- **Leadership:** a smaller group can select leaders, delegate authority, and make rapid decisions. The majority often must negotiate among many competing preferences before it can act.
- **Resources:** money, professional time, education, legal services, staff, technology, and control of employment or credit lower the cost of sustained political activity.
- **Institutional control:** command of ministries, legislatures, courts, parties, armies, police, schools, media, corporations, and platforms makes elite decisions enforceable and durable.
- **Networks:** repeated interaction among officials, professionals, donors, journalists, and business leaders creates trust, shared information, and channels for coordination that outsiders lack.
- **Internal cohesion:** even when elites disagree, they may defend common procedures, privileges, reputations, property arrangements, or the legitimacy of the system. Cohesion allows competition without institutional self-destruction.

The mechanisms are cumulative. Wealth without organization can be politically ineffective; office without information can be hollow; leadership without institutional access can be theatrical; and a cohesive elite without a credible formula can provoke resistance. Stable rule normally rests on a portfolio of advantages rather than a single resource.

1.5 The Political Formula

A political formula is the doctrine, belief, symbol, or legal-moral principle through which a ruling class justifies its authority. People generally prefer to obey an impersonal principle rather than the naked command of particular persons. A king rules by divine right; a party governs in the name of the nation or the working class; elected leaders invoke the people; judges invoke law and constitutional office; technocrats invoke expertise and necessity. The formula ties power to a conception of justice or collective purpose that is intelligible within the society's culture.

Mosca did not reduce formulas to conscious propaganda. A ruling class may sincerely believe its own doctrine, and the formula must resonate with widely held moral ideas. It can constrain rulers as well as legitimate them: once a regime claims to govern through law, equality, religion, or popular sovereignty, critics can judge it by those standards. Yet the formula does not explain power by itself. A group normally develops or adopts a formula because it already possesses organization and social weight; the formula stabilizes and moralizes the structure.

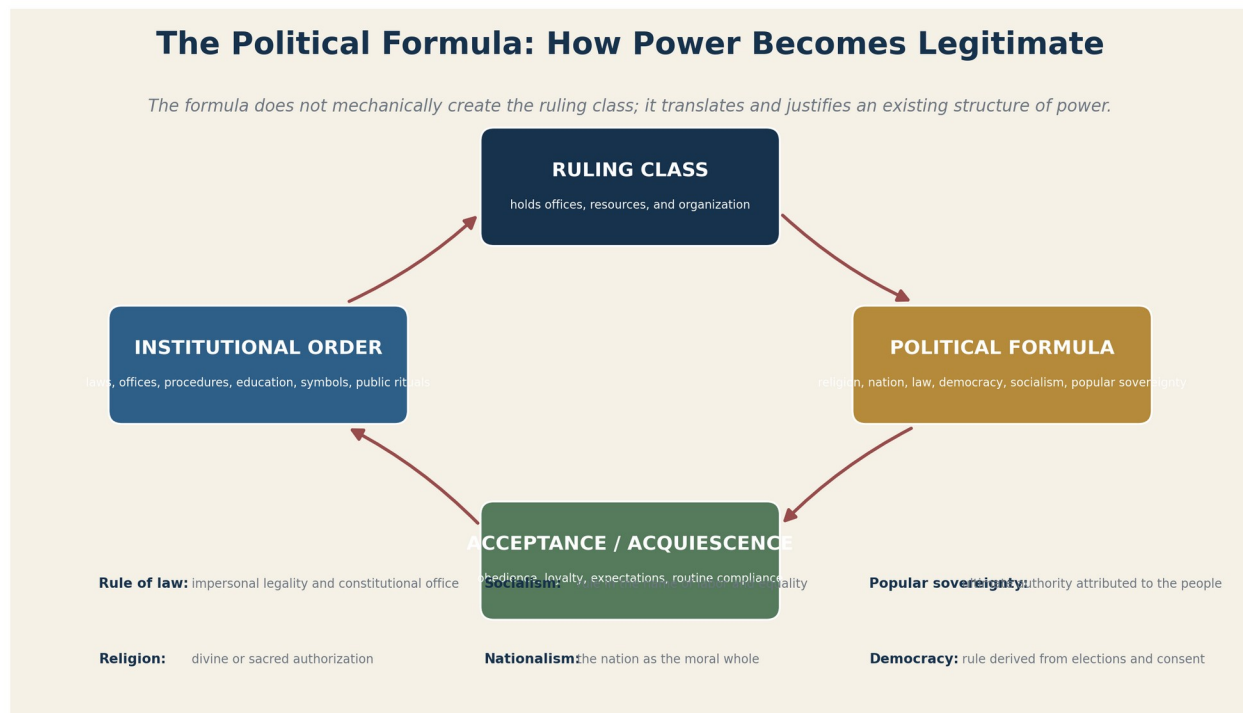


Figure 2. The political formula links organized power, institutions, and social acceptance.

Religion: The ruler is authorized by God, sacred tradition, revelation, or a religious community. The formula turns obedience into a moral or spiritual duty. Historical monarchies used divine-right doctrines; religious parties may claim to defend a sacred social order.

Nationalism: The governing group claims to embody the nation, defend sovereignty, restore greatness, or protect the national community from internal and external enemies. The formula can unify diverse classes but can also exclude minorities or suppress dissent.

Democracy: Authority is presented as the result of elections, representation, participation, and consent. Mosca argues that elections select among organized minorities rather than create direct majority rule, but democratic procedures can still legitimize, rotate, and limit elites.

Rule of law: Officials claim authority because they act through general rules, constitutional offices, due process, and independent institutions. This formula is especially important because it can become a real restraint when courts, associations, media, and competing offices possess autonomy.

Socialism: A revolutionary or governing party claims to rule on behalf of workers, equality, social ownership, or historical progress. The formula may legitimize a new political class even when workers do not directly govern.

Popular sovereignty: Ultimate authority is attributed to the people. Constitutions, referenda, assemblies, and electoral mandates express the formula. Mosca regards the idea as sociologically simplified, yet it can provide a powerful standard for accountability and inclusion.

2. Theoretical Structure

2.1 Composition of the Ruling Class

Mosca's ruling class is heterogeneous. It can be based on military prowess, religious authority, wealth, administrative expertise, legal knowledge, electoral skill, cultural prestige, or control of communication. Different societies reward different socially valued qualities. A warrior aristocracy, priesthood, bureaucratic service elite, landed nobility, commercial bourgeoisie, party machine, or technocratic-professional class can each provide the core of rule. The composition of the political class therefore reflects both the distribution of resources and the institutional needs of the regime.

The upper stratum is usually smaller and more cohesive: those who make final decisions, control appointments, and coordinate major institutions. A broader secondary stratum connects rulers to society. It includes local notables, administrators, party activists, officers, lawyers, journalists, managers, clergy, teachers, and professionals. This secondary layer translates commands, gathers information, recruits talent, and supplies legitimacy. A regime that loses this intermediary stratum becomes brittle because the rulers face the population without trusted channels of mediation.

2.2 Recruitment, Reproduction, Heredity, and Social Mobility

Every ruling class must reproduce itself. It does so through family, property, education, professional credentials, party apprenticeship, bureaucratic careers, military promotion, patronage, marriage, co-optation, and control of prestigious institutions. Heredity matters because elites transmit wealth, culture, confidence, networks, and access. Yet Mosca rejected a purely biological or fixed-caste explanation. New social forces continually generate capable outsiders, and effective regimes must absorb at least some of them.

Recruitment can be relatively open or closed. Open recruitment does not mean equal access; it means that the elite has institutional channels through which new talent and new interests can enter. Competitive examinations, elections, professional advancement, party careers, universities, military promotion, entrepreneurship, and civil associations can widen the pool. Co-optation is often conservative because existing rulers select newcomers, but it can also renew the regime by introducing skills, constituencies, and ideas that the old elite lacks.

Mosca distinguished the organization of authority from the formation of the political class. Authority may flow mainly from the top downward (an autocratic principle) or be delegated upward through electoral and representative mechanisms (a liberal principle). Elite formation may be aristocratic, emphasizing heredity and closure, or democratic, emphasizing recruitment from below and renewal. Actual regimes combine these tendencies. A bureaucracy can be democratically recruited but autocratically organized; an elected party can be internally aristocratic; a monarchy can incorporate liberal institutions.

2.3 Openness, Closure, Replacement, and Crisis

A ruling class becomes rigid when it mistakes inherited position for permanent fitness. Closure blocks new skills and social interests, weakens information, and encourages self-protection. The elite's political formula then loses credibility because the gap between stated ideals and visible privilege widens. Corruption is not merely private greed; it is the conversion of public offices into instruments of group reproduction. Patronage, nepotism, regulatory capture, selective law enforcement, and information concealment are symptoms of a closed elite.

Legitimacy crisis emerges when the governed cease to accept the political formula or when rival organizations develop a more persuasive formula. The crisis may be gradual: falling trust, noncompliance, cynical withdrawal, protest, electoral volatility, elite defection, or the rise of anti-system movements. It becomes dangerous when the ruling class cannot recruit new elements, adapt institutions, or divide and absorb opposition. A closed elite may survive for a time through coercion, but coercion increases costs and can accelerate internal fracture.

Political collapse becomes possible when three conditions converge: old elites lose organizational cohesion; new social forces acquire independent organization; and the legitimating formula ceases to command belief. Replacement can occur through election, reform, co-optation, coup, revolution, foreign conquest, or institutional breakdown. Mosca's theory is less teleological than Marx's: there is no guaranteed final class or emancipated end state. One minority replaces or recomposes another.

Diagnostic sequence

Closure -> information failure -> corruption and rigidity -> loss of formula credibility -> elite fragmentation -> organized counter-elite -> replacement or collapse. The sequence is a heuristic, not an iron law.

2.4 Juridical Defense and the Restraint of Power

Juridical defense is Mosca's most important normative concept. It refers to the social mechanisms that discipline power and protect persons against arbitrary rule. It includes law and due process, but it is broader than written law. Customs, moral expectations, independent professions, public opinion, institutional rivalry, rights of speech and association, and the practical ability to challenge officials all contribute. A constitution without organized forces able to defend it is only paper.

Mosca's deepest liberal principle is that power can be controlled only by power. Liberty is safest where multiple organized social forces coexist and none can absorb the rest. Separation of powers matters because offices with distinct constituencies, functions, and interests can check one another. Parliamentary institutions matter because they make conflict visible, force bargaining, expose rulers to criticism, and permit partial rotation. Courts matter when they possess independence, professional authority, and procedures through which individuals can resist the state. Associations, parties, unions, churches, universities, businesses, and media can become counterweights when they retain autonomy.

Limited government, in this perspective, is not the disappearance of the state but the multiplication of restraints around it. The ideal is a mixed order in which governing minorities compete, social forces are represented, and rules prevent the winner from converting temporary command into permanent monopoly. Mosca's mature defense of representative government therefore rests on institutional effects rather than democratic metaphysics. Even if popular sovereignty is a simplified formula, elections, parliamentary discussion, free expression, and divided authority can produce superior juridical defense.

2.5 Mosca on Democracy: Critique and Qualified Defense

Mosca criticized formal equality because equal legal status does not erase unequal organization, knowledge, wealth, prestige, and access. He criticized majoritarianism because a majority does not speak or act without agenda-setters, candidates, leaders, rules, and institutions. Electoral outcomes are produced by organized parties, campaign professionals, media systems, donors, and administrative procedures. The people do not govern as a single subject; they choose, authorize, pressure, or reject competing minorities.

This critique can appear anti-democratic, especially in Mosca's early opposition to universal suffrage and his suspicion of mass parties. Yet his mature position recognized that liberal democracy offers practical advantages: it allows elite turnover, exposes rulers to criticism, distributes power among offices, and gives citizens a sense and a mechanism of participation. He came to value parliamentary government as the most feasible modern form of mixed government, provided it was supported by rights, autonomous institutions, and social pluralism (Martinelli 2009).

Accordingly, Mosca's theory is not best understood as a simple defense of oligarchy. It is an anatomy of oligarchy combined with a constitutional strategy for controlling it. He rejects the utopian belief that elite rule can be abolished, but he also rejects the authoritarian conclusion that elite rule should be unified. The normative divide is not elites versus no elites. It is open, competing, legally constrained elites versus closed, monopolistic, and arbitrary elites. This position can reasonably be described as realist liberalism.

2.6 Political Power and Economic Power: Mosca versus Economic Reductionism

Mosca did not deny the political importance of wealth. Economic elites finance parties, influence employment and investment, own media, retain experts, and enter governing networks. In commercial societies, wealth is a major route into the political class. But he rejected the claim that political power is always a direct expression of ownership. Military, bureaucratic, legal, religious, or party elites can dominate wealthy groups; states can create, regulate, tax, expropriate, or protect property; and political organization can determine which economic interests prevail.

The relationship is therefore reciprocal and historically variable. Economic power supplies resources to political actors, while state power defines property, contracts, corporate forms, currency, taxation, labor law, and access to markets. Alliances often form between officeholders and owners, but the two are analytically distinct. A Mosca-style inquiry asks: Which economic actors are admitted into the political class? Which state officials possess autonomy? Through what networks do they coordinate? Which side controls appointments, information, coercion, and the political formula?

3. Comparison with Major Thinkers

The classical elite tradition shares a rejection of naive majoritarianism, but its members explain power differently. Mosca centers organization and political institutions; Pareto emphasizes elite qualities and circulation; Michels derives oligarchy from organizational necessity; Weber analyzes legitimate domination and bureaucracy; Marx centers ownership and production; Gramsci explains hegemony through consent and civil society; Mills studies the interlocking command posts of advanced institutions; Dahl argues that multiple competing minorities can produce meaningful pluralism.

3.1 Comparative Table

Thinker / model	Principal holders of power	Foundations of power	Elite replacement	Role of ideology	Position of masses	Evaluation of democracy
Gaetano Mosca	The political class: organized minorities occupying effective decision positions, inside and outside formal office.	Organization, leadership, information, control of institutions, resources, networks, and a legitimating political formula.	Recruitment, co-optation, inheritance, elections, partial renewal, or crisis-driven replacement. Openness versus closure is decisive.	Political formulas justify rule and align authority with prevailing beliefs; they are not mere decoration but do not mechanically create power.	A numerically superior but usually dispersed majority; capable of pressure, organization, and supplying new elites.	Formal majoritarian claims are misleading, yet liberal constitutional government, plural competition, and juridical defense can restrain elite power.
Vilfredo Pareto	Governing and non-governing elites, defined more broadly by superior performance and social position.	Psychological residues, skills, force, cunning, social utility, and control of strategic positions.	Circulation of elites: lions and foxes displace one another as governing elites decay and counter-elites rise.	Derivations rationalize conduct driven more deeply by residues.	Mostly non-elite and susceptible to elite manipulation, but a reservoir from which new elites emerge.	Democracy is another arena of elite rule; regime labels matter less than circulation and elite composition.
Robert Michels	Leaders and professional staffs of large organizations, especially mass political parties.	Technical necessity of organization, specialization, control of communication, and member passivity.	Leadership oligarchies reproduce themselves; replacement is limited and often changes personnel more than structure.	Organizational ideology mobilizes followers and may conceal the autonomy of leaders.	Members delegate, defer, and face high coordination costs; rank-and-file control is structurally weak.	The iron law of oligarchy makes full internal democracy unattainable, although countervailing devices can mitigate it.
Max Weber	Political leaders, bureaucratic officials, and those who successfully claim legitimate authority.	Legitimate domination - traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational - plus administrative means and specialized knowledge.	Charismatic succession, elections, appointment, career bureaucracy, routinization, and party competition.	Beliefs in legitimacy stabilize obedience and differentiate types of rule.	Subjects or citizens whose obedience is organized through legitimate orders; participation varies by regime.	Mass democracy requires parties and bureaucracy; leadership and administration are unavoidable, but parliamentary competition can select leaders and check officials.
Karl Marx	The economically dominant class, paradigmatically the bourgeoisie that owns or controls the means of production.	Property relations, control of production, capital accumulation, exploitation, and state structures that stabilize class domination.	Class struggle, changes in productive forces, revolution, and transformation of property relations.	Ruling ideas express material class domination, though ideology has relative autonomy in later Marxist theory.	The exploited classes can develop class consciousness and become collective historical agents.	Liberal democracy is constrained by class power; emancipation requires transforming the economic foundation of domination.
Antonio Gramsci	A ruling bloc that combines dominant classes, political organizers, intellectuals, and institutions of civil society.	Hegemony: consent organized through culture and institutions, backed by coercion and material leadership.	Organic crises, wars of position, formation of counter-hegemonic blocs, and creation of new intellectuals.	Central: common sense, culture, education, media, and moral-intellectual leadership construct consent.	Subaltern groups are fragmented but can organize, acquire consciousness, and build counter-hegemony.	Democratic transformation is possible when subordinate groups construct durable institutions and leadership, not merely win an election.
C. Wright Mills	A power elite linking top corporate, military, and political command posts in the United States.	Interlocking institutions, shared social backgrounds, command positions, and concentrated organizational resources.	Circulation among institutional hierarchies and co-optation within a relatively integrated elite.	Public relations and national-security narratives help legitimate decisions, but institutional location is primary.	A mass society with weak publics and limited effective participation.	Formal elections coexist with concentrated decision power; democracy is thinned when publics cannot organize countervailing power.
Robert Dahl	Multiple, competing minorities and organized interest groups rather than one unified ruling class.	Dispersed resources, electoral competition, associations, institutional veto points, and issue-specific influence.	Elections, group competition, coalition change, and access to institutions.	Ideas matter, but no single political formula permanently monopolizes legitimacy in a pluralist order.	Citizens participate unevenly through voting, groups, public debate, and organized interests.	Polyarchy is imperfect but meaningful: contestation, participation, and plural centers of power can prevent durable monopoly.

3.2 Mosca and Pareto

Both thinkers reject the idea that society is governed directly by the majority. Pareto's elite is broader: it includes persons who achieve the highest performance in any field, and he distinguishes governing from non-governing elites. His theory explains change through the circulation of elites and the alternation of psychological and strategic types, conventionally symbolized by lions and foxes. Mosca is less interested in superior performance or residues than in the political minority's organization, recruitment, and institutional position. Pareto asks what qualities characterize elites and why they decay; Mosca asks how the governing minority is structured and how it exercises and limits power.

3.3 Mosca and Michels

Michels applies the organizational insight to mass parties. Large organizations require leaders, specialized staff, control of records and communication, and rapid decision-making. These necessities generate an oligarchy even in parties committed to democracy. Mosca's claim is broader: every political society has a ruling minority. Michels supplies a micro-sociology of how one important kind of organized minority becomes autonomous from its members. Mosca leaves more room for competition among elites and for constitutional restraints outside the organization.

3.4 Mosca and Weber

Weber and Mosca both emphasize organization, leadership, and the gap between formal ideals and actual administration. Weber's distinctive contribution is a typology of legitimate domination and an analysis of bureaucracy as rule through specialized knowledge, hierarchy, files, and legal-rational procedure. Mosca's political formula resembles Weberian legitimacy but is more explicitly tied to the interests and self-justification of a ruling class. Weber gives a more developed account of administrative rationalization; Mosca gives a more general theory of the minority that occupies and connects governing positions.

3.5 Mosca and Marx

Marx defines the ruling class through the social relations of production. The bourgeoisie owns or controls the means of production, appropriates surplus, and shapes the state and ruling ideas. Mosca defines the ruling class through effective political organization. For Marx, economic class is the structural foundation and the state is deeply conditioned by it; for Mosca, political organization has relative autonomy and can be based on non-economic resources. A priesthood, military caste, party bureaucracy, or legal-administrative elite can rule even when it does not personally own the principal means of production.

The difference is not absolute. Mosca recognizes that the wealthy often enter or influence the political class, and Marx recognizes political organization, parties, and state institutions. The analytical priority differs. Marx asks who controls production and who benefits from exploitation. Mosca asks who controls authoritative decisions and the organizations that implement them. A complete contemporary analysis often needs both: economic structure explains resource asymmetry; Mosca explains how resources are converted into coordinated political command.

3.6 Mosca and Gramsci

Gramsci's hegemony expands the analysis of domination beyond coercion to culture, civil society, education, religion, media, and common sense. Mosca's political formula anticipates part of this insight, but Gramsci gives ideology greater productive power. Hegemony is not merely a justification attached to an elite; it is an organized moral and intellectual leadership that builds a historical bloc and shapes what social groups perceive as natural. Gramsci also grants subordinate classes a more active role in constructing counter-hegemony. Mosca tends to see mass organization mainly as the formation of a new political class.

3.7 Mosca and C. Wright Mills

Mills transforms elite theory into an institutional analysis of mid-twentieth-century America. The power elite occupies the command posts of corporations, the military, and the national political executive. Its members share social origins, careers, and networks, and move among institutional hierarchies. This is compatible with Mosca's wide conception of effective power, but Mills makes a more specific empirical claim about the integration of national elites. Mosca's framework allows either an integrated elite or multiple competing elite factions; the degree of unity must be investigated.

3.8 Mosca and Dahl

Dahl's pluralism is the strongest challenge to a monolithic reading of Mosca. In a polyarchy, different groups possess different resources and win on different issues; elections, associations, and institutional access prevent one minority from ruling everywhere. Mosca can accommodate elite competition, but his emphasis remains on the inevitable minority character of decision-making. The disagreement concerns the significance of dispersion. Dahl treats competition among minorities as a meaningful form of democracy; Mosca warns that even pluralism is organized by professional political classes. The theories become complementary when pluralism is treated as a question to be tested: are elites genuinely divided, can outsiders organize, and do institutions allow contestation to alter decisions?

4. Applications to Contemporary Politics

A Mosca-style analysis begins with effective power rather than formal titles. It maps who can place issues on the agenda, veto proposals, allocate money, appoint personnel, interpret rules, control information, mobilize organizations, and sustain action over time. It then asks how those actors are recruited, how they coordinate, which formula legitimizes them, and what countervailing forces restrain them.

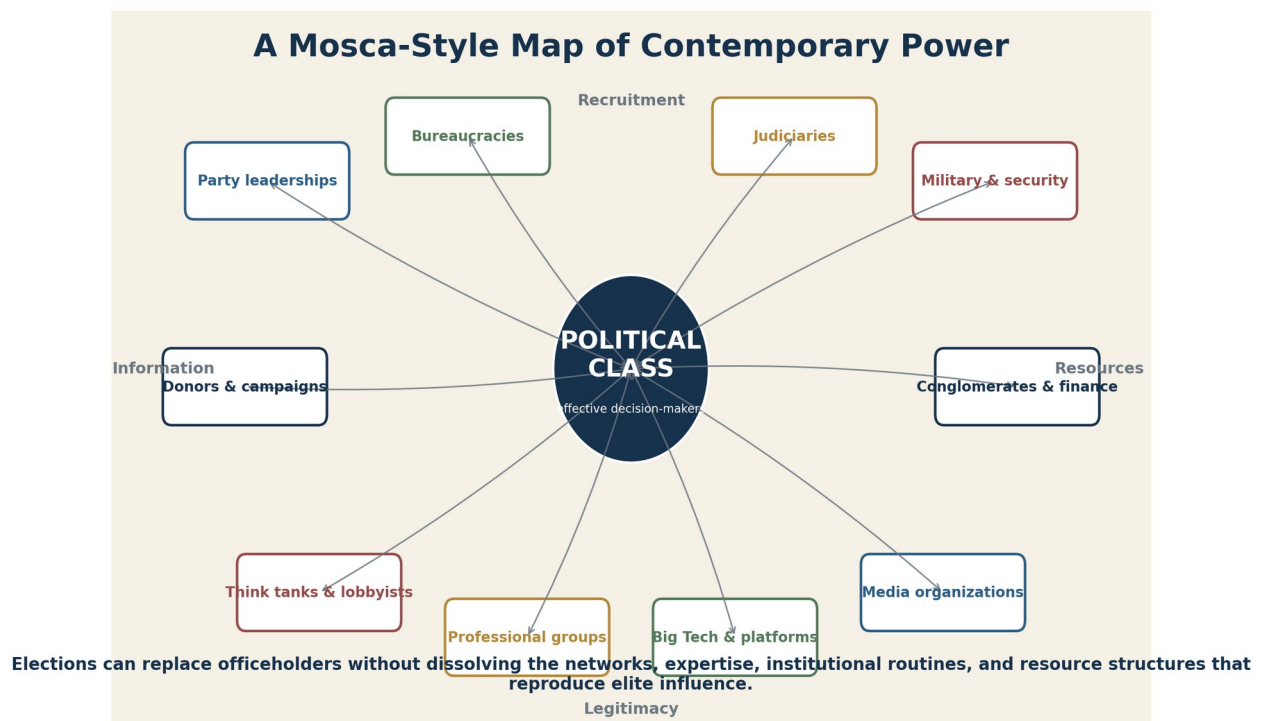


Figure 3. A contemporary map of organized actors that may compose or influence the political class.

4.1 Party Leaderships and Election Campaigns

Elections are not direct rule by an undifferentiated people. Parties select candidates, define platforms, allocate staff and money, analyze voter data, negotiate endorsements, and interpret results. Campaign consultants, pollsters, fundraisers, digital firms, and media professionals form a secondary political class around elected leaders. Voters can remove incumbents and alter coalitions, but the field of choice is structured by organizations that predate the election.

From Mosca's perspective, parties are machines for transforming dispersed preferences into organized power. They can democratize recruitment by opening careers to new groups, but they can also close themselves through donor dependence, leadership control of nominations, inherited political families, and professionalized gatekeeping. Populist parties do not eliminate the political class; they attempt to displace one elite with a new leadership cadre that claims a more authentic mandate.

4.2 Bureaucracies, Regulators, and Central Institutions

Modern government depends on permanent administrations. Senior officials possess specialized knowledge, procedural memory, and control over implementation. Elected leaders can set goals and make appointments, but they rely on the bureaucracy to translate political commands into operational rules. This dependency gives administrators structural influence even without a unified conspiracy. Their formula is competence, neutrality, legality, continuity, or evidence-based policy.

Mosca's framework also explains why bureaucratic power is not automatically illegitimate. Stable administration can protect juridical defense by applying general rules and resisting personal command. The danger arises when expertise becomes insulated from review, when agencies are captured by regulated interests, or when secrecy prevents countervailing institutions from evaluating decisions. The relevant question is whether bureaucracy is autonomous enough to uphold law but accountable enough to remain contestable.

4.3 Judiciaries and Legal Professions

Judges exercise power through authoritative interpretation rather than electoral mobilization. Their influence rests on professional recruitment, precedent, institutional independence, control of procedure, and the political formula of law. A Mosca-style analysis examines not only constitutional text but appointment networks, bar associations, elite law schools, judicial clerks, litigation finance, prosecutorial discretion, and the capacity of parties to gain access to courts.

Judicial independence can restrain executives and majorities, making it an instrument of juridical defense. Yet a closed judicial elite can reproduce social bias, shield itself from accountability, or convert legal expertise into unreviewable policy. The balance requires reasoned opinions, appeals, transparent ethics, plural recruitment, and protection from retaliation.

4.4 Military, Intelligence, and Security Establishments

The military and security apparatus concentrates coercive capacity and privileged information. Senior officers, intelligence officials, defense ministries, contractors, and legislative specialists form a dense professional network. Civilian leaders often depend on their threat assessments and operational expertise. The formula of national security can legitimate secrecy and urgency, sometimes narrowing public debate.

Mosca would regard civilian control as a relationship between organized minorities, not simply a constitutional command. Effective control requires elected officials with independent information, budgetary authority, legal oversight, and the willingness to challenge security professionals. Where the military becomes the only cohesive national organization, it can displace weaker political elites. Where multiple institutions check it, military expertise can coexist with constitutional government.

4.5 Conglomerates, Financial Capital, and the State

Large corporations and financial institutions possess concentrated resources, planning capacity, legal teams, data, and access. They influence public policy through investment decisions, lobbying, campaign finance, employment, procurement, and the ability to frame economic consequences. In the United States, European systems, and South Korea, major firms and financial actors are not identical to the political class, but they are connected to it through appointments, advisory bodies, party finance, professional mobility, and policy expertise.

In South Korea, the historical relationship between the developmental state and chaebol illustrates Mosca's reciprocal model: state elites helped create and discipline large firms, while conglomerates accumulated resources that later increased their influence over policy, media, and employment. In the European Union, regulatory and monetary institutions interact with national governments, firms, banks, and professional experts. In the United States, business associations, institutional investors, law firms, and lobbying networks link economic power to political organization. The exact balance varies; it should not be assumed in advance.

4.6 Media, Big Tech, and Algorithmic Power

Traditional media elites exercise agenda-setting power: they select stories, sources, frames, and reputational signals. Their authority is legitimated by journalism, public information, editorial judgment, and watchdog functions. Digital platforms add a new layer. Search ranking, recommendation systems, content moderation, identity rules, advertising markets, app stores, cloud services, and data access determine visibility and participation at scale.

Algorithmic power is Moschian because it combines organization, information asymmetry, expertise, and institutional control. Platform executives and engineers need not issue political commands to shape the environment in which politics occurs. They define default rules and allocate attention. The formula may be user choice, innovation, neutrality, safety, efficiency, or community standards. Counterweights include competition policy, privacy rights, interoperability, independent audits, procedural due process, transparency, and alternative infrastructures.

4.7 Professional Groups, Think Tanks, Lobbyists, and Donors

Professional groups convert credentials into authority. Lawyers define legal feasibility; economists model costs; physicians and scientists define risk; consultants and think tanks package policy choices; lobbyists provide access, drafting expertise, and coalition management. These actors often occupy the secondary stratum of the political class. They translate specialized knowledge into decisions and move between government, firms, universities, advocacy groups, and media.

Donors and campaign finance networks provide concentrated resources, but money becomes power only through organization: bundling, access, staffing, issue advocacy, candidate recruitment, and long-term relationships. Mosca's approach avoids two simplifications. It does not assume that every donation buys a decision, and it does not treat formal equality of contributions or votes as proof of equal influence. It maps the institutional channels through which resources acquire political effect.

4.8 Why Elite Influence Persists When Governments Change

Electoral turnover changes personnel, mandates, and policy direction, sometimes dramatically. But modern states and economies are built from organizations whose time horizons exceed electoral cycles. Bureaucratic files, legal precedents, debt contracts, procurement systems, military alliances, corporate strategies, professional credentials, media brands, platform architectures, and social networks persist. New governments inherit them and must bargain with their custodians.

The persistence is not necessarily evidence of a single hidden cabal. It is often the predictable result of specialization and institutional continuity. Mosca's contribution is to make that continuity visible. The relevant democratic test is whether persistent elites are plural, contestable, transparent, legally limited, and open to recruitment - or whether they have fused into a closed bloc that can ignore elections without consequence.

4.9 Contemporary Elite-Structure Matrix

Arena	Organized minority / strategic actors	Assets and control points	Typical political formula	Why influence persists after elections	Principal counterweights
Party leaderships	Candidate selectors, parliamentary leaders, campaign professionals, party finance networks.	Nominations, committee assignments, voter data, branding, fundraising, legislative agenda.	Party mandate, electoral victory, ideological program, defense of the people or nation.	Leadership pipelines, staff expertise, donor and activist networks, and control of candidate recruitment survive a single electoral cycle.	Internal elections, primaries, disclosure, factional competition, term limits, independent media.
Bureaucracies	Senior civil servants, regulators, central-bank and administrative specialists.	Technical knowledge, implementation discretion, continuity, files, procedures, and control over information.	Neutral competence, legality, public interest, expertise, stability.	Governments change faster than administrative systems; new leaders depend on existing expertise and implementation capacity.	Legislative oversight, courts, inspectors general, transparency, professional ethics, public participation.
Judiciaries	Senior judges, court administrators, bar networks, constitutional lawyers.	Authoritative interpretation, precedent, case selection, procedural control, professional legitimacy.	Rule of law, rights, constitutional guardianship, judicial independence.	Tenure, precedent, professional recruitment, and slow institutional time insulate legal power from electoral turnover.	Reasoned opinions, appeals, appointment procedures, ethics rules, jurisdictional limits, public criticism.
Military and security establishments	Flag officers, intelligence leadership, security professionals, defense contractors.	Coercive capacity, classified information, operational planning, threat assessment, procurement.	National security, defense of sovereignty, emergency necessity.	Specialized knowledge, secrecy, long procurement cycles, alliance commitments, and institutional continuity.	Civilian control, budgets, legislative authorization, courts, audit, free press, whistleblower protection.
Conglomerates and financial capital	Large-firm executives, institutional investors, banks, private funds, business associations.	Capital allocation, credit, employment, supply chains, investment, market access, lobbying.	Growth, jobs, innovation, competitiveness, financial stability.	Economic decisions are decentralized from elections, and governments remain dependent on investment, tax bases, and credit conditions.	Competition policy, financial regulation, taxation, labor organization, disclosure, shareholder and stakeholder governance.
Media organizations	Owners, editors, producers, platform-facing distributors, prominent commentators.	Agenda-setting, framing, attention, reputational sanctions, access to audiences.	Public information, watchdog journalism, national conversation, editorial judgment.	Brands, distribution systems, professional routines, source networks, and audience habits persist across administrations.	Plural ownership, editorial independence, public media, defamation law, transparency, media literacy, rival outlets.
Big Tech and social platforms	Platform executives, engineers, trust-and-safety teams, app-store and cloud gatekeepers.	Algorithms, data, ranking, identity systems, advertising infrastructure, network effects, technical standards.	Innovation, user choice, safety, neutrality, community standards, efficiency.	Code, data, ecosystems, and switching costs are not reset by elections; public authorities often depend on private infrastructure.	Competition law, interoperability, privacy, audit access, due process, transparency, decentralized alternatives.
Professional groups and think tanks	Lawyers, economists, physicians, academics, consultants, policy experts, advocacy specialists.	Credentialed expertise, standard-setting, policy design, elite networks, access to decision-makers.	Evidence, professionalism, scientific neutrality, best practice, public reason.	Credential pipelines and reputational hierarchies operate over decades and shape what counts as a feasible policy.	Peer review, methodological transparency, plural funding, conflict-of-interest rules, public contestation.
Lobbyists, donors, and campaign networks	Major donors, PAC and party fundraisers, lobby firms, coalition managers.	Money, access, information, drafting expertise, mobilization, threat of exit or support.	Participation, free association, representation of interests, policy expertise.	Relationships, institutional memory, and resource asymmetries remain even as elected officials rotate.	Disclosure, contribution rules, public financing, lobbying registers, ethics law, organized counter-interests.

4.10 Mass Parties, Populism, Digital Politics, and Polarization

Mass parties can weaken established elites by recruiting outsiders, building disciplined organizations among previously dispersed citizens, and creating alternative media and finance. Yet successful mass parties necessarily generate leaders, staffs, candidate selectors, and internal hierarchies. They convert the unorganized majority into organized minorities. The democratic question becomes whether the new leadership remains accountable and whether internal competition is preserved.

Populism attacks the legitimacy of an existing political class by contrasting a pure people with a corrupt elite. Mosca would treat this rhetoric as a counter-formula. Populists can open a closed system, expose collusion, and mobilize neglected groups. They can also concentrate power in a leader who claims exclusive representation of the people and attempts to neutralize courts, media, parties, and professional bodies. In that case anti-elite politics produces a more unified elite rather than less elite rule.

Digital politics lowers some costs of communication and mobilization. Citizens can publish, organize, fundraise, and coordinate rapidly. But scale creates new gatekeepers: platform owners, algorithm designers, moderators, data brokers, influencers, and professional campaign firms. The form of elite changes from party boss or newspaper owner to platform executive, network entrepreneur, or attention broker. Digital directness can therefore coexist with concentrated infrastructural power.

Polarization has an ambiguous effect. It can fracture an old consensus and open space for new elites. It can also strengthen existing leaderships by making followers more dependent on partisan information, punishing cross-cutting networks, and converting institutional criticism into identity conflict. When polarization destroys shared rules, elites may cease to check one another and instead seek total victory. Juridical defense requires intense competition within a common constitutional framework.

Mosca-style conclusion on digital democracy

Technology changes the cost and speed of organization, not the basic need for organization. The central question is who owns the infrastructure, who controls the data and ranking rules, and whether rival organizations can enter, inspect, and challenge the system.

5. Criticisms and Limitations

5.1 Excessive Generalization and the Problem of Inevitability

Mosca's universal claim risks becoming unfalsifiable. If every decision by many citizens is re-described as leadership by a minority, then no evidence could disprove elite rule. The theory may conflate the practical need for delegation with domination by a socially closed class. Democratic institutions can make leaders replaceable, constrain agendas, expand participation, and distribute authority even if they do not create literal rule by everyone. The existence of leaders does not settle the quality of democracy.

5.2 Underdeveloped Analysis of Class and Economic Structure

Mosca's refusal of economic reductionism is valuable, but he often moves too far in the other direction. Ownership, labor relations, debt, land, taxation, and capital accumulation shape the resources available for organization. They influence who can afford political careers, own communication systems, fund expertise, and survive opposition. Marxist and neo-Marxist theories provide a stronger account of structural dependence on investment and the reproduction of inequality. Mosca needs to be supplemented by political economy.

5.3 Gender, Race, Colonialism, and Exclusion

Mosca wrote within elite institutions that were overwhelmingly male and shaped by European imperial power. His categories do not adequately analyze how gender, race, caste, colonial rule, and citizenship exclusions determine access to the political class. A group's apparent lack of organization may be the product of legal repression, educational exclusion, segregation, dispossession, or violence. The theory can describe exclusion after the fact without explaining its historical construction or moral injustice.

Contemporary use must therefore ask not only whether elites are open, but open to whom and on what terms. Descriptive representation, unequal exposure to coercion, inherited wealth, migration status, and control of knowledge institutions are central. An elite can recruit a small number of outsiders while leaving the underlying hierarchy intact.

5.4 Underestimation of Mass Movements and Democratic Agency

Mosca tends to translate successful mass action into elite replacement. This can obscure the distinctive power of strikes, boycotts, protests, social movements, mutual aid, civil disobedience, and participatory institutions. Movements do generate organizers, but they can also alter norms, expand rights, force institutional redesign, and create distributed capacities that are not reducible to a new ruling clique. The civil-rights movement, labor movements, anti-colonial struggles, feminist movements, and democratization campaigns demonstrate forms of agency that exceed elite circulation.

5.5 Insufficient Account of Accountability and Institutional Learning

Mosca rightly emphasizes that constitutions require social forces behind them, but he can understate how formal rules themselves reshape incentives and expectations. Independent election administration, freedom-of-information law, judicial review, audit institutions, federalism, public-service norms, professional ethics, and transparent procedures can create feedback loops that improve accountability. Institutions are not merely masks for power; when enforced, they change the strategies available to elites and citizens.

5.6 Normative Ambivalence and the Risk of Cynicism

Elite realism can become a self-fulfilling ideology. If all ideals are dismissed as formulas and all participation as manipulation, citizens may withdraw and leave power to the most organized actors. Mosca himself does not require this conclusion: his defense of juridical defense shows that institutions and moral commitments matter. The theory is most useful when it exposes concentrations of power without denying the possibility of reform, accountability, or principled action.

5.7 Conceptual Ambiguity

Political class can refer narrowly to state officeholders or broadly to all effective social power. Ruling class can refer to a cohesive minority or to multiple competing minorities. Political formula can mean sincere belief, legitimating ideology, constitutional principle, or propaganda. These flexible concepts make the theory portable but reduce precision. Empirical analysis must define the unit: which arena, which decision, which period, and which threshold of influence qualifies an actor as part of the political class?

6. Overall Assessment

6.1 Scholarly Contributions

- Mosca helped found modern elite theory by treating organized minorities as a recurrent feature of political life.
- He shifted analysis from constitutional labels to the effective distribution of power.
- He identified organization as an independent political resource, not merely an expression of wealth or legal authority.
- He developed the political formula as a bridge between coercion, legitimacy, ideology, and social psychology.
- He analyzed elite recruitment, reproduction, openness, closure, and replacement as central variables of regime stability.
- He anticipated the study of informal institutions, networks, professional political classes, and the gap between legal office and effective influence.
- His concept of juridical defense supplied a realist foundation for rights, divided power, parliamentary debate, and plural social forces.
- He offered a framework that can be used comparatively across monarchies, democracies, bureaucracies, parties, corporations, and digital platforms.

6.2 Balanced Judgment

Mosca's enduring achievement is not the discovery that some people govern more than others. It is the construction of a systematic vocabulary for asking how minority rule is organized, justified, renewed, and restrained. His theory exposes the limits of formal democratic language without making elections or rights meaningless. It shows why democracy must be evaluated as an institutional ecology of competition, recruitment, criticism, association, and countervailing power.

The theory is strongest as a diagnostic framework and weakest as a complete social theory. It identifies organizational asymmetry but does not adequately explain all sources of inequality. It sees the political class but not always the deep structures of gender, race, empire, and capitalism that shape it. It warns against democratic illusion but sometimes underestimates democratic creation. It should therefore be used in combination with political economy, historical sociology, social-movement theory, feminist and postcolonial analysis, and empirical institutional research.

The most defensible interpretation is realist liberalism. Mosca accepts that minorities govern, but he does not regard every minority as equally legitimate or every regime as equivalent. He prefers orders in which elites are open, divided, contestable, and legally constrained; in which social forces can organize independently; and in which no ruler can transform personal will into law. The goal is not to abolish power but to prevent monopoly.

6.3 Ten Core Propositions of Mosca's Theory

1. Every complex political society is divided between a governing minority and a governed majority.
2. The minority rules primarily because it is organized, while the majority is normally dispersed and difficult to coordinate.
3. The political class consists of those who effectively participate in authoritative decision-making, not only those who hold formal office.
4. Power rests on a combination of organization, leadership, information, resources, institutional position, networks, and cohesion.
5. Every ruling class uses a political formula that justifies command in terms accepted by the society.
6. Ruling classes reproduce themselves through family, education, professions, parties, bureaucracy, patronage, and co-optation.
7. Elite openness permits adaptation and renewal; excessive closure produces rigidity, corruption, information failure, and legitimacy crisis.
8. Political change usually replaces or recomposes one organized minority with another rather than eliminating elite rule.
9. Liberty depends on juridical defense: rights, law, due process, free criticism, divided powers, and autonomous social forces that check one another.
10. Democracy is valuable not because the majority literally governs, but because competition, participation, and representation can rotate and restrain elites.

6.4 Mosca-Style Power-Analysis Checklist

Analytical question	Operational test
Decision arena	What concrete decision, institution, policy field, market, or platform is being analyzed?
Effective rulers	Who can initiate, veto, delay, reinterpret, finance, or implement decisions?
Formal versus real power	Do legal offices correspond to effective influence? Who acts outside the formal chart?
Organization	Which actors possess permanent staff, hierarchy, routines, budgets, and sanctions?
Information	Who controls data, expertise, secrecy, polling, legal interpretation, and agenda-setting?
Leadership	Who selects leaders and candidates? How are commands coordinated and dissent managed?
Resources	Who controls money, credit, employment, technology, coercion, media access, or professional time?
Networks	Which schools, firms, agencies, associations, families, and professional circles connect decision-makers?
Political formula	What doctrine legitimizes authority - democracy, law, nation, religion, expertise, security, equality, innovation?

Analytical question	Operational test
Formula credibility	Do rulers comply with their stated formula? Where is the gap between principle and practice?
Recruitment	How does one enter the political class? Elections, examinations, inheritance, credentials, patronage, wealth, activism?
Reproduction	How are status, knowledge, contacts, and resources transmitted to successors?
Openness	Can outsiders and new social forces enter without abandoning their constituencies?
Closure	Are appointments circular, hereditary, opaque, or controlled by a narrow network?
Counter-elites	Which organized rivals can challenge the ruling group? Do they possess independent resources and a credible formula?
Juridical defense	Can individuals and groups use courts, media, associations, elections, audits, and due process against rulers?
Elite unity	Are political, bureaucratic, economic, military, and media elites integrated or divided? On which issues?
Mass organization	Which parts of the population are organized, and which remain individually exposed to concentrated power?
Turnover versus continuity	What changes after an election or leadership transition, and what institutions or networks remain?
Failure indicators	Are there signs of rigidity, corruption, censorship, information failure, elite defection, or formula collapse?

Conclusion

Mosca teaches that political power is a problem of organized capacity. Majorities matter, but they matter through institutions, associations, leaders, and rules that make collective action possible. Ideals matter, but they matter through political formulas that legitimate and sometimes constrain the ruling class. Elections matter, but they operate within durable structures of recruitment, expertise, wealth, law, administration, and communication. The most important democratic task is therefore not to imagine a society without elites. It is to create an order in which elites remain divided, renewable, publicly contestable, and unable to suppress the independent forces that can check them.

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Source and Editorial Note

This report synthesizes Mosca's primary writings and major secondary interpretations. Contemporary applications are analytical extensions of Mosca's framework rather than claims that Mosca personally addressed present-day technologies or institutions. The report distinguishes descriptive claims about the persistence of organized minorities from normative judgments about constitutional legitimacy.

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