Political elites in Western states: Recruitment principles and areas of responsibility

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Abstract Today, political elites influence the global transformation processes that are taking place in the current environment. The elite shapes the vector of the state development strategy and actualizes the formation of resonant decisions. This article aims to analyze the principles of political elite recruitment and identify areas of responsibility in the example of Western countries. The research was carried out using general scientific methods, in particular, analysis, synthesis, comparison, abstraction, specification, and generalization. The study analyzes the main factors of elite recruitment and reveals the systems of its formation and the allocation of responsibilities. The authors have determined that the choice of the elite in the political sphere is an essential feature of state building. It represents the nature of power, its priorities, and its interaction with society. In addition, the specific features of the process of forming the political elite of Western countries are outlined, and the main issues of this process are highlighted. It is established that the process of developing a political elite in a particular country is marked by certain features that are formed under the influence of political, social, economic, and cultural factors. The authors have proved that the distribution of responsibilities of the political elite is considered to be a controversial issue. Therefore, its solution should be aimed at leveling the imbalance between the elite stratum of society and its majority to optimize socio-economic development. The practical significance of the proposed theoretical research findings is based on the allocation of practical aspects of optimizing the process of recruiting the political elite. The main basis of this process is identified by its compliance with moral and ethical principles and stimulation of the harmonious development of the state.

Keywords: recruitment, specific features, society, ways to improve, democratic process

1. Introduction

The political elite is a certain component of society that concentrates state power and holds key influential positions, thus realizing the management of society.

The basis for differentiating society into the political elite and the majority is a combination of unbiased factors of political and socio-economic specifics. The process of formation and development of the elite is a multifactorial, long-term process that takes decades, even if the state has the following favorable conditions:

− Stable political conditions and social environment.
− Effective material and informational resources.
− Reliable political traditions.
− A proper level of education and upbringing.

A significant amount of research by contemporary scholars is dedicated to studying the correlation between the quality level of the political elite and the principles of its formation and recruitment. Scholars (Naumenko, 2022; Kushnir, 2020) argue that among the methods of recruiting the political elite, including in Western countries, the most influential traditionally include local government bodies and the state apparatus, political activities, military service, religious organizations, and the education system.

Moreover, scholars (Lyashenko, 2022; Pavlova, 2020) note that for Western countries, integration into the political elite often occurs through positioning oneself within a particular political organization, trade union, or alternative community. Certain researchers (Ilnytska et al., 2022) believe that in this way, the career hierarchy of the Western European elitist layer is largely formed. As modern analysts emphasize (Drobotun, 2021), implementation into such a layer from another elite community is absolutely atypical.
At the same time, some scholars (Kononenko et al., 2020) believe that selection for the elite community in the political sphere is largely influenced by social background. Additionally, researchers characterize the convergence phenomenon with the elite from the middle and working classes, mainly through party affiliation with opposition forces (Balatska, 2020).

The recruitment issues of the political elite are thoroughly examined in the works of individual modern scholars (Mamontova, 2023; Mayboroda, 2022). Specific questions regarding the formation of responsibility spheres are reflected in the studies of representatives of well-known academic schools (Sushko et al., 2020).

At the same time, the transformation of recruitment principles and the sphere of political elite responsibility in today’s global transformations has yet to be sufficiently studied. Moreover, the possibilities of optimizing this process still need to be better understood, which requires further research.

This study aims to examine the main factors and ways of recruiting the political elite at the present stage, using Western countries as an example. It also outlines the process of forming the spheres of responsibility.

2. Literature review

The theoretical framework of this study is based on the interdisciplinary research findings of the modern scientific community. Scholars actively study the issue of the formation of political elites.

The main principles of the recruitment process of the political elite are described in the studies made by several contemporary scholars (Engler, 2020; Bakker et al., 2021). They argue that the source of recruitment is the selection of the best representatives of all segments of society.

At the same time, it is necessary to emphasize the studies (Fabbrini, 2022; Freudlsperger et al., 2021) that promote the opposite standpoint. According to them, the source of such selection is the administrative apparatus, which recruits the ruling elite. Scholars justify this stance by pointing out that the elite never cedes power but only, if necessary, to other elites.

Börzel T. A. and Risse T. (2020) conducted a comprehensive analysis of the studied phenomenon. The authors see an effective formation of a true political elite through a productive middle class, including the scientific and creative community. Some scholars (Kelemen et al., 2022) emphasize that education, especially its quality, has a significant impact on the inclusion of the political elite.

Damiani M.’s (2020) research materials can be considered an example of resonant scientific developments in this area. The author develops an opinion on the justified need for selected representatives of different segments of society to join the political elite.

Some representatives of the modern scientific community have made a significant contribution to the analysis of the formation and distribution of responsibilities among the political elite (Zwet et al., 2020). In addition, scholars have detailed the procedures for recruiting elite strata of society.

Despite significant developments in this research area, there are still some issues that still need to be explored. For example, this includes the peculiarities of the transforming principles of recruitment and distribution of responsibilities of the political elite in the current context of global transformations of socio-political processes. The consequent impact of such dynamics on the process of traditional recruitment has yet to be sufficiently studied. Moreover, the possibilities of optimizing the process still need to be better understood and, therefore, require further research.

3. Methods

The theoretical and methodological basis of this study is formed by a systematic approach and the dialectical method, and it is based on the prioritized principles of comprehensive research.

The research process involved general scientific methods of cognition, in particular, comparison, abstraction, analysis and synthesis, specification, and generalization. The methods of analysis and synthesis were applied to identify factors, stages of development, and the most influential elements of the studied object. The method of abstraction was employed to formulate the concept of the essence of recruiting the political elite. The method of concretization was used to identify its specifics for certain states. The method of comparison allowed the authors to analyze the existing approaches to the recruitment of the political elite and the formation of their areas of responsibility.

4. Results

Today, significant attention is paid to studying the functionality and aspects of the formation of ruling political elites and the ways of their recruitment.

The political elite has unique individual features, including status and public demonstration of decision-making levers that directly affect the implementation of essential roles and functions.

The definition of elite evokes associative parallels with a set of virtues and high moral qualities, authority, and informal leadership.

Recruitment of political elites is a process whose success determines the vector and efficiency of state development. The process involves the use of certain recruitment mechanisms and channels. Such mechanisms are primarily determined by
the principles of nominating new recruits to the political elite. They are characterized by the absence of a strict correlation between the type of society as a system, the specifics of elite recruitment, and the peculiarities of the dominant recruitment mechanisms (Fatkhutdinov et al., 2023).

The main institutional channels include local governments and the state apparatus, the military, political parties and religious organizations, and the education system. At the same time, the dominance of a particular channel is determined by the prerequisites of historical traditions of political development and the specifics of the political regime.

The implementation of a comparative study of elites and political leadership highlights the significant role of political parties in the formation of the highest echelons of power in the parliamentary regimes of most Western countries.

It should be noted that the bureaucracy serves as an essential channel of elite formation, mainly in developing countries. At the same time, in such developed countries as Germany, Japan, and Sweden, the vast majority of the political elite also owes their position to the civil service. For example, the biographies of the majority of parliament members in the United States, Germany, France, Italy, Austria, and the United Kingdom are marked by their work in local self-governments (Engler, 2020; Bakker et al., 2021).

From a comparative perspective, the UK and US political systems are marked by rather a late institutionalization of civil service as a channel for recruiting the political elite. Also, the influence of civil service experience on the process of forming the top echelons of power in these countries is rather weak. At the same time, certain social institutions, including religious organizations, effectively fulfill the functionality of the political elite recruitment channels. In particular, Catholic official communities and trade union organizations have a strong influence in Poland, Italy, and Spain (Zakharova et al., 2022).

Military service is traditionally seen as an influential lever for the success of a political career. For instance, in Israel, five Israeli prime ministers (Shimon Peres, Yitzhak Rabin, Benjamin Netanyahu, Ehud Barak, and Ariel Sharon) owe their political career success to the effective realization of their potential during their service in the army and intelligence service (Engler, 2020; Bakker et al., 2021).

The system of education is viewed as another important potential channel for rising to the top of the political hierarchy in the West. However, in some countries (primarily in the UK and France), the importance of the education system as a channel for elite recruitment is so great that we can speak of a practical coincidence between the education system and elite recruitment.

Public schools are an essential part of the system of training future leaders of the country. Although they enroll about 5% of the total number of students, these schools are the primary channels of reproduction of the political elite. One-third of these schools are the most respectable and prestigious, and the elite of the elites are Eton, Winchester, Rugby, and Harrow. Some of them are very dynamic, which contributes to the self-reproducing nature of the political elite. For example, two-thirds of Eton’s students are sons of former graduates of this educational institution. At the same time, eighteen prime ministers have graduated from Eton. The second element in the system of elite reproduction is the colleges of Cambridge and Oxford (Kelemen et al., 2022; Hubanova et al., 2021).

In France, the education system is the main channel for recruiting the elite and an effective tool for promotion in the political hierarchy. The condition for selection to specialized prestigious universities in France is successful competitive selection. Such selection opens up opportunities for implementation at the highest level of the management system and the public administration apparatus. At the same time, the process of recruiting the political elite in France is limited by the time factor and the ability to make quick decisions and adapt to the new environment. Moreover, the civil service itself is positioned as very prestigious and honorable (Börzel et al., 2020; Akimov et al. 2020).

In general, the theory of political elite formation distinguishes two main types of recruitment, namely the guild system and the entrepreneurial system. The first system involves the selection of persons who already function in elite strata, as well as numerous filters in the recruitment process, a limited range of selection, and the concept of self-reproduction. The entrepreneurial system is open, with few filters, a broad electorate, and stimulation of competition.

Recruitment of the political elite in most Western countries synergizes political relations and public relations, information campaigns, and social marketing (Ilnytska et al., 2022). Political elites are often recruited through the media. Among other things, they represent the actions of political elites and aspects of political processes, often at their own or patronage’s request. The media are also seen as a functional tool for involving political elites in the process of shaping political public opinion.

The permeability of recruitment channels in Western countries creates variability in the horizontal transformation of the political elite. In particular, a significant level of channel permeability is typical for the United States. In this country, people from various fields of business, science, and education are integrated into the top echelon of the administrative apparatus. In this aspect, the biographies of G. W. Bush and his sons, who came to politics from the big oil business, are illustrative (Fabbri, 2022; Freudlsperger, 2021).

It is necessary to note that the boundary and the level of permeability of channels are characterized by a tendency to intensify during crises, slowing down in neutral periods. A fundamentally different situation regarding the permeability of channels is observed in France compared to the United States, where representatives of the political elite may take leading...
positions in the private business sector upon completion of their state careers. Still, the reverse direction of the path is hindered (Zwet et al., 2020; Masyk et. al., 2023).

In Western countries, the political elite is identified as the central link of state governance. The format of its functioning determines the course of political development of society, social purpose, and the state of the international situation.

Among the most significant functions of the political elite are organizational, strategic, communicative, and integrative, which are worth highlighting. It should be noted that the functionality is identified as the toolkit of the political elite’s sphere of responsibility and is characterized by significant variability.

The essence of the strategic function of the political elites of Western countries lies in shaping the tactics of society's development and identifying political activity. The instrument of the function is the generation of innovative approaches and ideas reflecting societal demand and radical dynamics, as well as the development of the concept of ripe reforms. In this case, the strategic function is fully realized exclusively at the highest level of the political elite.

The communicative function of the political elites of Western countries includes the definition of effective formation, presentation, and reflection in political concepts of the needs of various social strata, with subsequent practical implementation. The outlined function involves:

- Identifying the characteristics of different social moods and trends.
- Promptly responding to the dynamics of public opinion.
- Defending social values and goals (Kolot et al., 2022).

The implementation of the communicative function requires characteristic qualities from the political elite, including oratorical talent, personal charisma, the ability to address questions, persuasion, and conflict resolution skills specifically.

The essence of the organizational function of the political elites of Western countries is positioned as the ability of the political elite to guarantee public support for their programs. The outlined function involves the practical implementation of the developed course and the implementation of political decisions in the process of societal life (Byrkovych et al., 2023).

At the same time, the concept of a strategic direction is embodied in a system of various political measures. The latter most often include:

- regulatory measures that provide for the allocation and redistribution of material, human, and financial resources;
- legislative measures, which include the adoption of laws and other regulations by the government, the president, and the parliament;
- coordinative measures, which include all aspects of coordination of central and regional functions;
- mobilization measures, which include various forms of influence on public consciousness and value orientations;
- control measures, which include tools for effective controlling (Bondarenko et al., 2021; Lopushniak et al., 2022; Alekseeieva et al., 2023).

The conceptual framework of the integrative function of the political elites of Western countries is focused on strengthening the factor of societal stability, the stability of its political system and value orientations, and avoiding acute conflicts and imbalances. The priority goal of this function is to unite different social strata of society based on the priority of harmonization of social interests, interaction, and joint development. The main goal of the political elite of Western countries within the framework of this function is to ensure a stable balance of political forces, as well as to guarantee the stability of the political system.

5. Discussions

The issue of recruiting the political elite is one of the main issues during the transformation of the political system. The effectiveness of its implementation directly affects the possibility of effective reforms and successful development.

Many contemporary experts are studying the algorithms and specifics of recruitment and selection of the political elite in their academic works (Engler, 2020; McNamara & Musgrave, 2020). The results of their studies indicate the need to analyze aspects of recruitment and selection dynamics of political elites in the context of modern transformation processes.

Some scholars (Dujisin, 2021) focus primarily on the laws of elite circulation, thus analyzing the recruitment and selection processes of political elite representatives. According to Dujisin Z., the circulation of elites is realized by replacing or promoting non-elite social strata into the elite. According to the author, neither of these forms is identified as a democratic mechanism.

Other scholars (Hameleers et al., 2021) see the second form of elite transformation as an aspect of the dynamics of the balance of power through the emergence of new organizational forms. Hameleers M., Schmuck D., et al. are also convinced that the political elite is subject to continuous processes of transformation. Furthermore, they believe that the elite's tendency to imbalance and deformation leads to actualizing the growth of their stability and exclusivity.

Many contemporary scholars identify two main vectors of political elite selection: democratic and aristocratic. The latter involves recruitment exclusively through reproduction, from generation to generation. The democratic vector is considered to be open. In this case, the elite is selected from society by selecting outstanding persons with specific qualities and skills that are suitable for exercising power (Kotsur and Voitenko, 2023; Melnyk et al., 2022).
Some contemporary scholars (Destradi et al., 2021; Guth & Nelsen, 2021) identify the basic processes that serve as indicators for the formation of modern political elites, which include:

− a decrease in the level of power of the elite layer with an increase in its quantitative content;
− the dynamics of the elite exclusivity factor;
− the transformation of the rules for selecting the elite and its internal structure.

According to some authors (Jenne et al., 2021), the peculiarities of political elite selection are determined by the presence of certain forms of social hierarchy dynamics. Jenne, E.K. et al. believe that the individual characteristics of the social organization of society determine the priority recruitment mechanism.

It should be noted that modern political scientists (Henriksen & Seabrooke 2021; Stubbs & Lendvai-Bainton, 2020; Kotsur et al., 2023) interpret the process of elite formation from the perspective of making it impossible to exclude elements of the guild system of elite selection in democratic developed countries, with the apparent priority of the entrepreneurial system. According to scholars, this situation is caused by the powerful potential of the guild system to maintain agreement within the elite and internal stability.

Despite the considerable scientific interest in the process of recruiting the political elite and the distribution of responsibilities, further research into the possibilities of optimizing this process remains relevant.

6. Conclusions

The recruitment of the political elite is a multifactorial and formative process. This study analyzes the main factors of political elite recruitment and reveals the recruitment systems and allocation of responsibilities. The authors have determined that the elite formation process is an essential feature of state-building. This process represents the nature of power, its priorities, and its interaction with society. The specific features of the targeted recruitment process in Western countries are outlined, and the main issues of the process are highlighted.

During the study, the authors determined that the recruitment process of the political elite in a particular country is marked by certain features that are formed under the influence of a set of prerequisites of political, social, economic, and cultural aspects of influence. It is proved that the distribution of responsibilities of the political elite is positioned as a debatable issue. The solution to this issue should be aimed at leveling the imbalance between the elite community and the social majority.

The research proved that the recruitment procedure is seen as a crucial aspect of the functioning of the political system overall, as it identifies equality of opportunities. Based on the outlined approach, it seems promising to develop the concept of the recruitment process democratization while prioritizing the selection of people with outstanding professional and personal qualities.

It is proven that it is possible to use the successful experience of Western countries in forming recruitment processes that are currently taking place in many countries. It is also possible to identify reserves for increasing the level of efficiency of socio-political activity, taking into account a combination of factors of influence of the internal and external environment. The authors have established that a democratic society is typified by an open system of the elite stratum formation process, where the way of election prevails over the way of appointment.

The authors have proposed priority areas for further scientific research on the relevant topic based on the research findings. They have also argued for the need for practical testing of theoretical and methodological developments in this area.

Nowadays, an effective management system should be based on the implementation of a development strategy formed upon the democratic principles of the formation of a political elite. There is a need for further practical research on the risks and challenges related to recruitment and distribution of responsibilities in the studied area.

Ethical considerations

Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest

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