Guardians of Democracy?
Elite Beliefs and the Theory of Democratic Elitism

Mark Peffley and Robert Rohrschneider

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Early studies of public opinion revealed a number of startling and wholly unfavorable comparisons between mass belief systems and those of elites, variously defined. In a series of landmark studies, one analyst after another documented the decidedly impoverished state of political sophistication of public opinion when compared to elites, particularly in the U.S.: remarkably low levels of political information, a lack of ideological thinking and "constraint" among various policy attitudes (e.g., Converse 1964), and a disturbing lack of commitment to basic democratic principles such as political tolerance and minority rights (e.g., Stouffer 1954, McClosky 1964, Prothro and Grigg 1960). The only silver lining in these early studies was the comparatively high level of sophistication and democratic virtue discovered among activists and elites, whose political attitudes were not just based on a vaster store of information and expertise, but were highly structured by ideologies and were firmly anchored to an ongoing commitment to democratic principles and institutions. These findings, coming as they did from a number of different quarters, appeared to confirm a central claim of the theory of democratic elitism: political elites and activists were the 'carriers of the democratic creed' who protected the democratic order from an unsophisticated and often undemocratic public.

These scholars also said a great deal about both the sources and the benefits of the superior quality of elite beliefs in democratic politics. Elites are more sophisticated, it was argued, because they have all the advantages on their side: they are better educated, better socialized into the give-and-take of democratic politics, possess a disproportionate degree of expertise, and are recruited from the most able socioeconomic strata. There are also sizable benefits that presumably spring from sophisticated elite beliefs. Elite communication is greatly facilitated because reliance on a common ideology provides a powerful and efficient heuristic for making sense of the confusing buzz of information in the political

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world. Elite discourse thus helps to structure political debate so that publics can adopt elite "packages" of ideas—to know "what goes with what," even if they do not know why (Converse 1964). Moreover, if a consensus exists among elites in their support for democratic values, such values are likely to be transmitted to the public at large, or at least to its more politically active elements (McClosky 1964; McClosky and Zaller 1983).

The claims of elitists have been the focus of a protracted debate in the political behavior literature for the last 50 years. This essay does not review the entire body of elite studies; fortunately, others in this volume cover various aspects of elite research (Blondel and Mueller-Rommel; Hoffman-Lange) and masses (Kuklinski and Peyton; Mutz; Gibson) that are beyond the scope of our review. Instead, we focus on empirical evidence for four of the more controversial pillars of the democratic elitism thesis defined by the early studies (e.g., Converse 1964, McClosky 1964, and Prothro and Grigg 1960): 1) an elite consensus exists in their support for and commitment to democratic values (the consensus-pillar), 2) elites' democratic attitudes are highly structured (constraint pillar), 3) elites are substantially more democratic than the mass public (the mass-elite pillar) and 4) act as reliable guardians of democracy , protecting democratic institutions from an unsophisticated and intolerant public (the guardianship pillar).

In addition, our review gives particular weight to survey studies comparing elite and mass opinions in cross-national contexts, for such studies help to overcome one of the more serious limitations of the early research: the near-exclusive focus on mature democracies, in general, and the U.S., in particular. As shall become clear, as one moves beyond the U.S., the pillars of democratic elitism become increasingly questionable propositions. A central concern of this review article is to assess the extent to which the pillars of the elitism thesis hold up when viewing the evidence from a cross-national perspective.

Accordingly, this essay assesses the claims of the elitists by evaluating empirical evidence from three bodies of research. First, we examine the growing body of elite research on political tolerance, both in the US and abroad, which provides the most direct evidence about how committed elites are to democratic values compared to mass publics. Second, we explore analyses of elite beliefs in new

democratic institutions—either at the national or the supra-national level (e.g., the European Union)—to determine whether political elites support the norms of newly established democratic institutions. And in the concluding section, in addition to providing a final assessment of theory and research, we consider recent elite studies that shed light on our central question, What does the available evidence tell us about the quality of elite decision-making at the beginning of the 21st century?

The Long-term Sources of Elite Beliefs

What factors shape elite beliefs? Most analyses would point to their socialization as an important source of elite attitudes. The fundamental idea of the socialization approach is that the exposure of political elites to the operating procedures of a regime develops the values that underlie an institutional framework. The confluence of pre-adult socialization, adult political learning, and the selective recruitment of individuals with desirable traits contribute to the emergence of mass-elite differences in political beliefs (Putnam 1973, 1976; Searing 1971).

At the beginning of elites' socialization is their exposure to a range of sources that all members of a polity are exposed to, mostly through parents and peers, but also religious institutions, mass media, or friendship networks (Putnam 1976). These forces operate both at the national and supra-national level. For instance, Euro-elites' prior national experience shapes their preferences on integration, such that commission officials "from political systems in which political authority is concentrated….believe that national institutions are capable of effective control….The political system that is most conducive to these preferences is that of a large, unitary, state." (Hooghe 2001: 116). This research   suggests that earlier elite learning constitutes a powerful influence on elite beliefs.

In addition, political elites are disproportionately exposed to the norms of a regime and thus have more opportunities to internalize regime norms than ordinary citizens (Putnam 1973; Aberbach, Putnam, and Rockman 1981; Rohrschneider, 1999). Selective recruitment, in turn, entails that individuals' with regime-conforming characteristics are selected for leadership positions in the first place (Sullivan et al. 1993). Elite research therefore uniformly finds that individuals with higher education or with system-

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conforming values are more likely to advance to positions of prominence than individuals who lack these attributes. Finally, *political* elites are, if anything, strategic actors. They take into account short-term factors such as the performance of a regime, or the personal benefits they derive from a specific set of institutions (Hooghe 2001). It is thus not only the long-term effects of socialization on elite attitudes that must be accounted for, but also elites' more short-term self interest that should predict their political belief systems. Only a combination of socialization and self-interest factors is likely to provide a fuller understanding of how elites behave the way they do—and whether they are likely to act as defenders of the democratic creed.

Given the varied range of sources that contribute to the learning of elite beliefs, it is difficult, perhaps even impossible, to pinpoint the unique contribution of each process. However, if as numerous studies demonstrate, elite socialization shapes elite attitudes, these studies cast some doubt on the consensus and guardianship pillar of democratic elitism especially in new democracies. For we cannot assume that political elites are the standard bearers of the democratic creed in previously authoritarian nations where democratic learning could not have occurred. Indeed, the notion that education serves as a source not only of enlightenment but also of indoctrination led some analysts to suggest several decades ago that one must consider the undemocratic circumstances under which elites came to be educated: if elites are educated in an authoritarian context, they may actually be more reluctant to endorse democratic values (Klingemann 1966). Thus, once we move outside the realm of mature democracies, socialization arguments raise the disquieting possibility that post-authoritarian elites may not endorse democratic values and beliefs to the same degree that their US counterparts do.

Let us examine the available evidence in light of this implication. We begin by reviewing research on political tolerance which speaks directly to the four tenets of democratic elitism. Subsequently, we review the emerging literature on elite beliefs in other value domains and countries.

Political Tolerance Research

More than any other area, research comparing levels and sources of political tolerance (defined as a willingness to allow the expression of ideas that one opposes) of masses and elites has provided one of the most focused assessments of the elitist theory of democracy. The seminal studies of Stouffer (1955) and McClosky (1964), who found dramatically higher levels of political tolerance among elites than masses, provided much of the initial empirical support for democratic elitism. In his landmark survey study of political tolerance in the U.S. during the McCarthy "Red Scare" era, Stouffer (1955) uncovered a large gap between masses and elites (defined as leaders of local political and community organizations) in their tolerance of left-wing groups (mainly Communists). And McClosky (1964) found that political elites (delegates to the 1956 Democratic and Republican conventions) were more committed to democratic norms and values than the mass public. Findings from these and other studies (e.g., Prothro and Grigg 1960) laid the groundwork for the elitist theory of democracy by suggesting that democracies were only likely to endure if elites—acting as "guardians of democracy" and "carriers of the democratic creed"— protected the regime from an intolerant public.

Other survey studies of political tolerance helped to establish democratic elitism as the conventional wisdom. Nunn, Crocket and Williams (1978) replicated Stouffer's survey in the 1970s and concluded that mass-elite differences in levels of political tolerance are attributable to the selective recruitment of elites from higher socioeconomic strata. In addition, McClosky and Brill (1983, 243) concluded that elites in their surveys were more supportive of democratic values because they were better positioned to learn such complex norms than ordinary citizens. Not only are elites more likely to be exposed to libertarian principles and the practical lessons of applying such principles to "actual (and often puzzling) cases," but elites are more likely to possess the motivation and "knowledge, enlightenment, and openness to alternative modes of thought and conduct that are not often found among the mass public." The conventional wisdom encapsulated in democratic elitism thus reversed the traditional roles of citizens checking elites in classical democratic theory. As McClosky and Brill (1983, 434) argued, we should "take comfort from the fact, as Stouffer did, that community leaders who are more tolerant than the

general public are likely to exercise a disproportionate influence over public policy." This literature, in short, helped to establish the first pillar of the elitism thesis-- elites are fundamentally unified behind democratic values.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, the elitist theory of democracy as applied to political tolerance came under sustained attack by tolerance researchers whose findings in the U.S. and abroad raised serious questions about the wisdom of relying on elites to serve as guardians of democracy. One of the more trenchant critiques of democratic elitism comes from Sniderman and his colleagues' (1989, 1991, 1996) Charter Rights study in Canada which consisted of a large mass sample and a sample of political elites from the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government. The authors found that even in mature democracies like Canada the differences across elites of different political parties often eclipse average mass-elite differences in levels of political tolerance. Across an array of civil liberties controversies, Sniderman and his colleagues found that elites from more than one Canadian political party were less tolerant than the public overall.

In addition, Sniderman et al. (1989) extend this insight to the U.S., where they reexamine McClosky and Brill's (1983) survey findings to show that, in similar fashion, whereas McClosky and Brill compare only the average levels of mass-elite differences in political tolerance, breaking down both groups by ideology demonstrates that conservative elites in the U.S. were less tolerant than conservative citizens and were markedly less tolerant than liberal citizens. Thus, in both Canada and the U.S., comparisons between elites and masses overall may be misleading. Rather, it matters which elites are in power and which elites make policy. And, to draw an example from Western Europe, when extremist right-wing or xenophobic parties emerge, they are led by nondemocratic elites. A general point, then is, that there may be significant differences across parties regarding the extent to which political elites support the democratic creed. In short, the consensus pillar may not apply to all elites.

One could add that it also makes a difference which values (or groups) in controversies over liberties are in conflict. Sniderman et al. (1996) find that when elites and citizens are presented with arguments designed to talk them out of their initial opinion on tolerance, elites are just as likely to switch

positions as citizens. And even more disturbing, elites (and citizens) who initially adopt a tolerant position are more likely to change their views than those who initially adopt an intolerant position (c.f., Barnum and Sullivan 1990; Gibson 1998; Peffley et al 2000).

Sniderman et al (1991, 363) conclude that "there is less than compelling evidence that political elites, merely by virtue of being elites, are distinctively reliable guardians of civil liberties. There is marked divergence within elites by party; indeed, so much so that what counts is not whether elites or ordinary citizens, but rather which elites, make civil liberties policy." Clearly, political learning at the elite level involves exposure not simply to the values of the larger culture but also to the norms of particular groups, which may or may not be tolerant. In short, democratic elitism assumes that the decisive contrast is between masses and elites, thus ignoring which elites prevail. But the electoral system chooses among competing sets of elites, not a mythical average. It thus matters which elites are compared to mass publics when evaluating the validity of the first (consensus) and third (mass-elite differences) pillars of the elitism thesis.

The consensus pillar of elitist theory encounters the greatest resistance from studies of political tolerance outside the U.S. and other English speaking countries (e.g., Great Britain, New Zealand). As several scholars have pointed out, if elitist theory claims that elites are more inclined to learn the dominant norms of the system than the masses, then elites from formerly non-democratic regimes or in newly emerging democracies may provide a much weaker commitment to democratic values and practices (e.g., Klingemann 1966; Gibson and Duch 1991). Obviously, in order to test this proposition one needs cross-national surveys conducted in countries where elites have been exposed to different regime norms and democratic practices.

Rohrschneider's (1996, 1999) study of political tolerance among members of the united Berlin Parliament shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall and unification offers one of the more stringent tests of this proposition. This study gains analytical leverage from a naturally occurring quasi-experimental design where a major difference between eastern and western MPs is the different institutional-level learning experiences to which they were exposed before unification; thus, any differences between eastern

and western MPs can be attributed to institutional learning. Rohrschneider's findings underline the importance of institutional learning when it comes to extending civil liberties to offensive groups. On the one hand, MPs from former East and West Germany showed similar levels of support for *general* values of democracy, presumably because, consistent with value-diffusion models, citizens in previously authoritarian systems developed a preference for western democratic values though a variety of sources (e.g., access to western television, contacts with the West, etc.). On the other hand, eastern elites were much less likely to connect their support for democratic values to specific applications of tolerance of least-liked groups. Thus, despite their higher socioeconomic status, elites provide a shaky foundation for tolerance if their institutional learning experiences encourage intolerance.

The preceding studies raise serious questions about the consensus and mass-elite pillars, especially in non-Western countries and in circumstances of high threat and objection to offensive groups. Under more "normal" conditions of moderate levels of threat , however, many studies continue to find that while mainstream elites often equivocate in their support for democratic values, they are still more tolerant than mass publics. In short, the third pillar of the democratic elitism thesis may still hold up, at least under certain conditions. Just why this is the case is the subject of a rare four-nation (Britain, Israel, New Zealand and the United States) study of the sources of the gap in tolerance between citizens and national legislators by investigators whose prior work critiqued various aspects of elitist theory (Sullivan, Walsh, Shamir, Barnum, and Gibson 1993). After extensive analysis, Sullivan and his colleagues determined that two explanations (distilled from early studies of political tolerance) account for mass-elite differences in levels of tolerance: 1) "the *selective recruitment* of Members of Parliament, Knesset and Congress from among those in the electorate whose demographic, ideological and personality characteristics predispose them to be tolerant," (italics added, 51) and 2) the transforming adult *political* socialization experiences associated with becoming a political leader and governing that affect political tolerance over and above the impact of individual-level, personal characteristics, such as the necessity of having to compromise with one's opponents and the responsibility of having actually to govern.

We should stress, however,, as the authors acknowledge, there are likely to be many exceptions to the conditions under which either selective recruitment or political socialization operate to generate higher levels of political tolerance among elites than among masses. First, as we discussed above, many elites are less tolerant than the masses on several civil liberties issues. Second, Sullivan et al are obviously referring to the socializing experiences of political leaders operating in a democratic system, not a more authoritarian system (c.f., Rohrschneider 1996) or a younger, emerging democracy where liberal norms are less consensual and less internalized among elites (c.f., Shamir 1991).

In addition, elite socialization toward tolerance may only lead to a sober second thought when elites perceive that the threat from dissident groups is below a certain threshold. As others have noted, the elite-mass gap in tolerance occurs primarily when the target group in question is not perceived by elites to pose a serious threat to the democratic order—e.g., Communists and the KKK in the 1970s in the U.S. or non-extremist groups elsewhere. In contrast to such "easy" tests of tolerance, when political elites perceive a high level of threat from dissident groups, and the gap between elite and mass tolerance shrinks considerably, neither elite individual characteristics nor political socialization are sufficient to impel elites to substantially greater tolerance levels than ordinary citizens. Thus, when confronted with extremist groups perceived to be highly threatening, political leaders in Israel, Germany, Canada and local elites in the U.S. in the 1950s were *not* dramatically more likely to engage in a sober second thought than were ordinary citizens.

One final caveat, noted by Barnum and Sullivan (1989) and others (e.g., Gibson and Bingham 1985), is that most studies, with the exception of Stouffer, have defined elites rather narrowly as members of national legislatures when local-level officials (e.g., police, permit-granting officials, local elected officials, lower court judges) who are in a position to restrict political freedom are not necessarily more tolerant—or even *as* tolerant—as members of the public (cf. Gibson 1988; Shamir 1987; McClosky and Brill 1983; Barnum 1982).

All in all, tolerance research seriously questions the first component of the elitism thesis (elites are consensually unified). It also provides considerable evidence that the constraint and mass-elite pillars

emerge principally when specific conditions are present (e.g., stable democratic institutions, low or moderate levels of threat from groups). Overall, however, the third pillar of greater elite than mass tolerance receives perhaps more consistent support across a range of contexts, but even here various contingencies and caveats apply.

A final limitation of elitist theory taken up in the context of tolerance research is that it assumes that elite *attitudes* translate into *behavior*. Evidence for the first three attitudinal pillars is often taken as support for the fourth, guardianship pillar, which stresses the behavior of political elites in protecting democracy from an intolerant public. Most elite research, however, does not provide direct evidence of how elites act because it focuses almost exclusively on the attitudes of elites (and masses), paying little attention to the correspondence between elites' attitudes and their role in the policy-making process when deciding to either tolerate unpopular groups or repress them. Do elites actively prevent repression, as elitist theories assume? Do they discourage the mobilization of mass intolerance against offensive groups? Or do political elites act like politicians, bending to political calculations when it is expedient to promote the repression of unpopular groups, regardless of their expressed attitudes? In other words, to what extent do elites act as guardians of democracy, as elitist theory claims (i.e., the guardianship pillar)?

We find disquieting answers in the few studies that examine the role of elites in *making* tolerance policy. Gibson's (1988) study of the political repression of Communists during the McCarthy era in the American states explored the degree to which tolerance of Communists among masses or elites (aggregated from Stouffer's surveys) were better able to explain the number of state laws passed to repress Communists during the late 1940s and early 1950s. In an ingenious use of the original Stouffer data, Gibson's intriguing "whodunit" analysis assessing the independent effects of mass and elite attitudes on state policies points the finger more at elites than ordinary citizens. Though masses may have been willing accomplices, contrary to elite theory, there is ample evidence that elites played a defining role in the McCarthy Era, not as guardians of democracy, but as a mobilizing force for political repression in the states.

Michal Shamir's (1991) study of political tolerance in Israel casts further doubt on the proposition that political elites act as reliable guardians of democracy. By surveying elites and masses during a time when the Israeli Knesset considered banning extremist groups who won seats in the legislature[1], Shamir's study challenges elitist theory on three major counts. First, in contrast to elitist theory, her national survey of Israeli Knesset members and citizens found that the former was just as intolerant as the latter. Second, she found that elite discourse and policy-making on the important question of banning political groups was influenced more by the Members' ad hoc political calculations than their attitudes. Shamir was able to document that Members voted to ban groups as a result of political calculations and coalition building. *Competing elites did not restrain each other's intolerance toward particular groups but rather cooperated in limiting a broader array of groups*. Third, as in the McCarthy Era in the U.S., elites were not guardians of democracy but initiated various efforts to mobilize intolerance among the public, which was largely a passive observer and not the source of repressive policy.

Once again, evidence for elitist theory is at its weakest in situations of high threat and objection to offensive groups. On the one hand, it could be argued that the findings of these two studies are most worrisome because the guardianship role of elites is most critical for preserving civil liberties when threat *is* high from unpopular groups. On the other hand, elites may nevertheless play an important guardianship role when threat is below a certain threshold and the political risks of protecting unpopular groups are not viewed as prohibitive.

Elite Attitudes in Other Value Domains

If we extend our purview to other democratic values outside the tolerance domain, we find once again that support for the pillars of the elitism thesis is dependent on context, especially when we move outside of the realm of advanced industrial democracies. Let us begin with the good news. The few studies of

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[1] After the 1984 elections, the Knesset considered banning one extremist group on the right (Kash, an extremist, anti-Arab right-wing group) and another on the left (the Progressive List for Peace, an extreme left-wing party espousing the views of Palestinian nationalism).

democratic values of elites show that elites in Western Europe support liberal democratic ideals (Putnam, 1973; Aberbach, Putnam, and Rockman 1981; Rohrschneider 1994), while other forms of democracy, such as socialist models, receive little support. At the general, abstract level then, Western European elites are indeed strong supporters of liberal democratic forms of governance, consistent with the consensus pillar.[2]

The news becomes more grim as the focus shifts beyond the stable democracies of the West and the evidence supporting the consensus pillar is much weaker. A series of mass-elite comparisons in Russia and the Ukraine by Miller, Hesli, and Reisinger, for example, indicates that elites who were elected after the collapse of socialism base their understanding of the term "democracy" to a considerable degree on liberal ideals of political freedoms, the rule of law, and political participation and are fairly supportive of market reforms, despite their socialist upbringing (Miller et al 1997; 1995; Reisinger et al. 1996). At the same time, however, there are substantial differences within the elite sector, depending on whether elites are political or bureaucratic, or whether they reside in rural or urban areas. In a similar vein, a study of local Chinese elites shows that elites are quite divided over civil liberties: local Communist Party members are much less likely to favor democratic procedures than activists favoring institutional change (Chen 1999). Thus, just as Sniderman et al (1996) argued in the context of civil liberties in Canada and the US, whether we find support for the consensus pillar depends critically on which elites are being examined.

Furthermore, there is only weak support for the mass-elite pillar of the elitism thesis. On the one hand, mass publics are more likely than elites to mention social egalitarian protections of democracies. This suggests that elites are more committed to the liberal democratic creed than mass publics. On the other hand, "the differences are not huge" (Miller, Hesli, and Reisinger, 1997: p. 178). A general pattern is that, just as Rohrschneider found for Germany (see the earlier discussion of German MPs), post-authoritarian elites are relatively more committed to democratic principles than mass publics. At the same

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[2] We are somewhat tentative in our assessment, given the few numbers of studies which directly examine elite conceptions of democracies.

time however, political elites are not necessarily consensually unified behind democratic principles; neither are mass-elite differences as substantial as one finds in Western Europe. We therefore conclude that the consensus and mass-elite pillars of the democratic elitism thesis are not fully supported in a post-authoritarian context, certainly not to the degree that the elitism thesis presumes.

Regarding the constraint pillar, we find similarly mixed evidence in the research literature about elite beliefs. In Western Europe, political elites and political activists exhibit much higher levels of constraint than ordinary publics (Granberg and Holmberg 1988; Converse1986). Similarly, political elites display a considerable degree of attitudinal consistency across a range of democratic attitudes, such as liberal democratic rights, perceptions of conflict, and pluralist party competition (Putnam 1973). In contrast, politically elites in new democracies lack this structure. For instance, Miller, Heslie, and Reisinger find that the inter-connections between democratic beliefs at the elite level is rather low, sometimes no higher than that of mass publics. They argue that the lower constraint results from the lack of consistency in the information environment in fledgling democracies that "lack institutions and arrangements that enhance predictability in procedures, stable party alignments, and representational accountability" (Miller, Heslie, and Reisinger, 1995: pp. 22-23). A virtually identical conclusion emerges in a study of political elites and citizens in Beijing (Chen 1999). Overall, the implications of these analyses are sobering: when moving outside the realm of mature democracies it is not just the content of elite beliefs that falls short of the elitism thesis; it is their structure as well.

In summary, our discussion and evidence about elite beliefs seriously complicates the pillars of the democratic elitism thesis. We may not assume, without any systematic empirical study, that elites even in mature democracies are consensually unified behind the democratic creed. And we certainly may not assume that elites in new regimes are the defenders of the creed. The second pillar is also problematic: the belief systems of elites in new democracies are often surprisingly unstructured. Stronger support for the democratic elitism argument emerges for the third, mass-elite pillar: to the degree that mass and elite beliefs are compared, studies reveal across the board that elites are more democratic than mass publics, although once again these differences are often not very large.

Strategic Sources of Elite Beliefs. While our discussion up to this point has emphasized (regime) socialization as a foundation for elites' commitment to democratic values, studies continue to find that there is substantial variation in the degree to which different elites in the same country support democratic values. This suggests to us that elites do not simply enact the values they acquired during the socialization process, but are also strategic actors who consider a range of short-term calculations when deciding whether to support a democratic regime. These short-term factors include a variety of considerations, from the economic performance of regimes to elites' national interests when evaluating European integration. Theoretically, it is important to recognize that elites evaluate institutions based not only on their long-standing predispositions, but also from the standpoint of their personal and policy goals. Political elites are naturally drawn to governing structures that efficiently produce desirable policy outputs (Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti 1993) and that give them access to decision-making processes (Highly and Gunther 1992).

The importance to elites of good governmental performance was demonstrated by Robert Putnam and his collaborators in their study of Italian elites (1993). Their ingenious analysis shows that when malfunctioning institutions are replaced with institutions that perform better, the same politicians become more supportive of those institutions.[1] This evidence squares with a large literature on the tendency for countries experiencing more economic success to foster democratic stability in the long-term (e.g., Lipset 1959; Przeworski 1991), a linkage that requires greater support of successfully performing democratic institutions from political elites (and publics). The important point here is that elites' preferences for specific institutions cannot be divorced from their desire for institutions that perform adequately. As Miller, Heslie and Reisinger argue: "if [citizens] believe that the present regime is not fulfilling their expectations of that ideal democracy, then they will be less supportive of the current attempts at democratization" (1997: p. 185). In other words, elites may reject a democratic regime for performance-related reasons, not just because they lack a commitment to democratic values.

A second factor that may enter the strategic calculations of elites, and subsequently influence the content of elite beliefs about democratic processes, is that political elites have access to the decision-making institutions of a system. Some newly designed regimes exclude minority elites—for instance, along religious, ideological, or ethnic lines—and this usually reduces their willingness to accept democratic structures. For this reason, a number of analysts suggest that during democratic transitions so-called "pact-making" elites must include all relevant elite sectors (Highley and Gunther, 1992) in order to encourage most elites to accept new democratic institutions. These tactical considerations also become apparent in Hooghe's analysis of bureaucrats in the European commission: material incentives do shape their institutional preferences (Hooghe 2005).

In summary, these studies strongly suggest that short-term political calculations influence elites' willingness to endorse democratic institutions. This may overcome some of the deficits in democratic socialization—if the performance of new regimes is favorable. In other words, elites may become defenders of the democratic creed even if initially they are not strongly committed to democratic values. If, however, new democracies fail to perform adequately or elites are barred from access to decision-making institutions, they may be unwilling to support democratic regimes even if they hold the right kind of beliefs. Thus, the short-term calculations of politicians may lead them away from being the guarantors of democracies, just as research on political tolerance suggests (i.e., see Gibson 1988, Shamir 1991).

Conclusion

We conclude with the following assertions. First, the consensus pillar of the democratic elitism thesis cannot be assumed to be true. While elites may support democratic beliefs, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that there are so many exception to this "rule" that it should not be taken for granted. Second, as a general rule, elite beliefs tend to be more structured than mass beliefs. However, we also found evidence that the constraint pillar must be seriously qualified in new democracies since we encounter so many exceptions that it is questionable that this pillar applies to non-democracies. Third, perhaps the strongest support emerges for the mass-elite pillar. To the degree that differences between the two levels emerge,

political elites are clearly more democratic than ordinary publics. We do note, however, that this statement is relative: in conditions of high threat and in many non-Western democracies, the gap between masses and elites in their commitment to democratic principles shrinks considerably. Fourth, the few studies that examine the behavior of elites in carrying out their guardianship role raise serious questions about whether elected elites are reliable guardians under conditions of high threat.

All in all, then, studies of elite belief systems have made some progress in articulating and examining the various components of elite theory. However, in order to make further advances we would like to see not just *more* studies of elite attitudes, but studies that take advantage of recent advances in mass survey technology. The conventional cross-sectional survey is the predominant form of elite survey and is perfectly suitable for assessing the consensus of elite values and making static comparisons with mass samples. But, as others have pointed out, it is poorly equipped to assess the dynamics of political reasoning or the strength of respondents' commitment to various ideals. Mass surveys on political tolerance, for example, now routinely incorporate a variety of survey experiments that can be used to assess how pliable one's initial responses are in the face of persuasive appeals and changes in critical features of civil liberties vignettes. While this technology has been employed in a handful of elite studies (e.g., Sniderman et al; maybe Sullivan and Barnum?), there obviously needs to be more, especially in order to assess the degree to which elites' equivocate in their commitment to democratic principles under different political conditions.

In order to examine the degree to which the release of beliefs are pliable, we would argue that elite research should use experimentation in elite studies. Manipulating features of the question or vignettes can yield enormous insights into the consistency of citizens' attitudes under different theoretically specifiable conditions. One might assume that elites' attitudes are crystallized and never vary, but such an assumption is obviously questionable given what we know about beliefs: when features of the situation change, elites' attitudes should be responsive to such changes. Therefore our suggestion to use persuasion experiments.

In addition, there need to be more longitudinal studies of elite attitudes in countries where critical features of the political environment are changing in order to assess the *dynamics* of political learning and socialization of elites. We would like to know, for instance, whether elites in newly democratizing regimes adjust their values as a result of their experience with democratic politics. To our knowledge, only one study uses interviews with political elites from two different time points in order to examine whether political attitudes change after a regime transition (Rohrschneider 1999). There are a host of unresolved issues that can be addressed with panel data , such as the stability of elite attitudes, the extent to which elites reject democracies when the performance of institution fails, or, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, how pliable elite attitudes are.

We conclude, however, by pointing to an important area where we know surprisingly little about elite beliefs: what is the quality of the elites' actual decisions? We discussed some evidence, based on tolerance research, which questions whether political elites actually protect civil liberties when they make policy decisions (Gibson 1988; Shamir 1991). Overall, however, this is a surprising shortage of studies that directly examine the actual behavior of elites, particularly the short term, strategic factors and the foibles of human judgment that prompt elites to depart from their role of expert decision-makers and defenders of the democratic creed.

The exception is Philip Tetlock's work investigating the responsiveness of real experts' beliefs to counterfactual information. Tetlock presents evidence that shows that, for a variety of reasons, experts often render decisions that are often no better than those an amateur observer of policy issues would have made (Tetlock 1999; 2005). He presents persuasive evidence that a number of mechanisms lead policymakers astray, in particular their prior commitment to a policy position that leads them to stick to a position even if it turns out to be incorrect, and their inability to incorporate new, discrepant information.

All in all, then, perhaps one poignant way to highlight the central conclusion of this essay is that while elites are perhaps our best bet in securing democratic rights, they are far from being a safe bet.

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Endnotes

Hooghe, Liesbet (2005). "Several Roads Lead to International Norms, but few via International
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[1] See appendix B, table B1 in their study.