The theory of democratic elitism can be regarded as a felicitous combination of Joseph Schumpeter’s “competitive theory of democracy” and Carl Friedrich’s “rule of anticipated reactions” (1963:199–215). It combines Schumpeter’s method of leadership selection through competitions for votes with Friedrich’s rule that leaders anticipate voters’ reactions to policies and adjust them accordingly, thereby providing a feedback mechanism between voters and governments. There has been a broad consensus in democratic theory and political science that this fusion of Schumpeter’s method and Friedrich’s rule is unproblematic and useful because it simultaneously ensures an efficient method of leadership selection and rule by the demos. In this happy consensus it is taken for granted that the fusion of Schumpeter and Friedrich makes leaders accountable to and representative of those who elect them. In these respects, democratic elitism is clearly distinguishable from more radical participatory concepts of democracy and from paternalistic or authoritarian rule.

During most of the twentieth century’s second half, democratic elitism formed an important part of mainstream democratic political theory, though it was challenged sharply by “anti-elitists” such as Peter Bachrach (1967) and Carole Pateman (1970) and, less pointedly, by a renewal of the liberal theory of representative democracy in the works of Hanna Pitkin (1967) and John Plamenatz (1973). Replying pugnaciously to the anti-elitists while not quarrelling greatly with the liberal theorists, Giovanni Sartori (1987) defended democratic elitism and reinforced its place in the mainstream of democratic political theory. Yet near the twentieth century’s end, after political radicalism in
Western Europe had ebbed and communist regimes in Eastern Europe had fallen, new challenges to democratic elitism emerged in the guise of deliberative democracy, feminist theory, and identity politics.

A further challenge to democratic elitism has emerged even more recently, this time not from normative theorists, but from more empirically minded scholars. This most recent challenge does not yet constitute a single discourse, and it exists in a scattered literature. Its exponents focus on agency rather than structure, assigning to political leaders a much larger role in the functioning of today’s democracies than democratic elitism supposes. They emphasize political leaders’ room for maneuver vis-à-vis institutional constraints such as democratic elections, and they question the accountability and responsiveness of elected leaders. For example, Danilo Zolo (1992) worries that growing social complexity is undermining the neo-classical paradigm of pluralist democracy, so that the distinction between democratic elitism and an untrammeled elitism is vanishing, and Emilio Santoro (1993) interprets Schumpeter’s theory in a way that supports Zolo’s concern. Bernard Manin (1997), after reviewing the history of democratic representation, describes today’s representative democracies as “audience democracies” in which personalities, rather than parties and party programs, play the pivotal role in electoral competitions.

On the basis of extensive empirical research, James D. Fearon (1999) likewise concludes that democratic elections are now much more about selecting “good types” of candidates than judging office holders’ performances and the policy positions taken by leaders competing for votes. Adopting a rational choice approach and marshalling evidence, José María Maravall (1999) buttresses the claim that in electoral democracies incumbents are less accountable and responsive to voters’ wishes than democratic elitism teaches. Margaret Canovan (1999) portrays populist appeal and charismatic leadership not as pathological but, rather, as an inescapable feature of representative democracy. Yves Mény, Yves Surel and their co-authors (2002) investigate the sources of populism and highlight the trend toward a personalization of power in today’s democracies. Jean Blondel (2005) discusses how this increasing personalization of power skews the interplay of political parties in contemporary European democracies, while Thomas Poguntke and Paul Webb (2005) sketch the “presidentialization” of these democracies. András Körösényi (2005) re-works the concept of “leader democracy” that Max Weber employed to capture the essence of plebiscitary democracy, while John Higley and Jan Pakulski (2007) speculate that