The most striking renewal of elite theory in the last decades has been the systematic linkage of elites to democracy. This linkage stands in sharp contrast to classical elite theory, which stressed the tensions, even the incompatibilities, between elites and democracy. The renewal of elite theory results partly from the changed conception of democracy introduced by Joseph Schumpeter. It also results from a better understanding of the relative autonomy of various institutional fields in modern societies—economy, law, science, politics, culture—and of the pivotal roles that large and hierarchical organizations in these fields play in democratic politics. Hence, it is now well recognized that democracy’s bottom-up character, stressing the political equality and participation of citizens, is accompanied by an array of elites at the tops of institutional hierarchies.

This duality of citizens and elites is a source of constant and probably unsolvable tensions in modern democracies. Semantically, it warrants the oxymoron “democratic elitism,” which, despite its contradictory character, is essential for understanding how modern democracies function. Two separate debates have emerged around democratic elitism. One refers to the relationship between the electorate and elected political representatives. Here the political involvement of citizens is the main issue and the basic question is whether democracy is solely a method for allocating decision-making responsibility to elected representatives, or whether citizen participation between elections is desirable or even necessary for democracy (Schumpeter 1942; Bachrach 1967). The second debate concerns the interrelationships of political and other elites in democracies’ day-to-day decision-making processes. Here the distribution of decision-making power among multiple elites is the issue (Etzioni-Halévy 1993; Higley and Burton 2006), with citizens’ influence accorded secondary importance.

Unlike the debate over Schumpeterian vs. participatory democracy, which has flourished for several decades, there is still too little debate
about the interrelations of political and other elites in democracies. By contrasting two theoretical approaches to these interrelations, this chapter seeks to illuminate this important aspect of democratic elitism. One approach is charted by Eva Etzioni-Halévy in *The Elite Connection* (1993), in which democratic elitism is rooted in a theory of inter-elite conflict. The other approach is charted in a series of articles initiated by Gwen Moore’s analysis of elite integration in the United States (Moore 1979) and in comparative analyses of American, Australian, and West German elites (Higley and Moore 1981; Higley, Hoffman-Lange, Kadushin, and Moore 1991). This approach roots democratic elitism in a theory of elite consensus. Can these two approaches be combined in a single framework, and what theoretical modifications does this require?

*Elite Conflicts in Democracy*

Eva Etzioni-Halévy critiques the normative theory of democracy and applies the position that she develops to several contemporary democracies. Her critique connects directly to the classical liberal theory of democratic checks and balances, conceived by John Locke and formulated by Baron De Montesquieu, but transposed into a theory of institutional differentiation in modern societies. Etzioni-Halévy asks how the democratic norm of political equality can be reconciled with the growing inequalities in material resources and power created by the efficiency and complexity of large-scale organizations in diverse institutional fields. Her answer is simple and clear: If powerful political and other elites cannot be abolished, for democracy to work they must be balanced against each other.

The core concepts in Etzioni-Halévy’s book are *elite pluralism* and *elite autonomy*. “Elite pluralism,” she writes, “has to do with the numbers of elites”; for democracy to work there must be a fairly extensive number of sector elites and sub-elites sharing power. On the other hand, “elite autonomy has to do with the distribution of resources between [elites]” that makes it impossible for one elite, such as the political elite, to dominate all other elites (Etzioni-Halévy 1993:97). She enumerates, in addition to freedom from physical coercion, three types of resources: material, administrative/organizational, and symbolic (ibid.:98). Democracy presupposes that elite autonomy is institutionalized in two respects: in the relationship between elites themselves, and in the relationship between elites and the state.