

Theoretical Foundations of Political Dynasticism: Elite Theory and Patronage Politics

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Abstract

This paper offers a theoretical analysis of political dynasticism by integrating elite theory and patronage politics to explain its persistence across democratic systems. While conventional studies focus on the empirical prevalence of dynasties, this research conceptualizes dynasticism as a structural and operational feature of modern electoral politics. Drawing on classical theorists like Pareto, Mosca, and Michels, as well as modern contributions by Mills and Bourdieu, elite theory helps explain the intergenerational reproduction of power among political families through inherited capital, institutional access, and symbolic legitimacy. Complementing this, the framework of patronage politics reveals how dynasties function as hubs of clientelist exchange, leveraging resources, networks, and party structures to maintain dominance. The paper develops a composite model demonstrating how elite reproduction and patronage mobilization intersect to reinforce dynastic control. It further explores the implications for democratic accountability, meritocracy, political inclusion, and institutional integrity, highlighting the systemic barriers faced by non-dynastic aspirants. While acknowledging counterarguments around stability and symbolic representation, the study concludes that political dynasties pose a fundamental challenge to democratic ideals, necessitating deeper institutional reforms. This work aims to reframe dynasticism not as a cultural anomaly, but as a predictable outcome of entrenched political inequality.

Keywords: Political dynasticism, elite theory, patronage politics, clientelism, democratic representation, political inequality.

Introduction

In democratic theory, political participation is assumed to be open, competitive, and based on merit. However, the empirical reality in many democracies tells a different story — one marked by the prevalence of political dynasties, where power is concentrated within a few influential families across generations. From the Gandhi-Nehru family in India to the Bush and Kennedy families in the United States, dynastic politics has become a durable feature of both emerging and advanced democracies.

Political dynasticism refers to a pattern in which political authority and public office are transferred within familial networks, often without significant opposition or challenge from non-dynastic aspirants. While such patterns are particularly pronounced in South and Southeast Asia, Latin America, and parts of Africa, they are not entirely absent in Western democracies either. This persistence raises critical normative and analytical questions: Why do democratic societies — which ostensibly value equality, competition, and meritocracy — continue to reproduce elite political families? What explains their resilience over time?

Conceptualizing Political Dynasticism:

Understanding political dynasticism requires a layered conceptual lens, exploring its definition, characteristics, global manifestations, and theoretical significance. Dynasties in politics are more than family legacies—they are institutionalized power arrangements embedded in party structures, electoral systems, and

social hierarchies. To study them meaningfully, one must examine how dynasticism functions, where it appears, and why it matters theoretically.

2.1 Definition and Characteristics:

Political dynasticism refers to the intergenerational transfer of political power within families. This involves elected offices being repeatedly occupied by individuals related through blood, marriage, or kinship to past or present politicians. Such transmission may occur through direct succession or indirect grooming within party hierarchies.

Key characteristics include:

- Hereditary Succession: Political positions treated as familial assets.
- Name Recognition: Advantage from symbolic capital and public visibility.
- Control of Party Infrastructure: Preferential access to tickets, funding, and media.
- Continuity of Patronage Networks: Inherited clientelist and bureaucratic linkages.
- Normalization: Dynasties become seen as legitimate through narratives of legacy and grooming.

Dynasties may also operate informally, with relatives holding influence without holding office, or family members gaining power due to proximity to established leaders.

2.2 Global and Regional Patterns:

Political dynasties are a global phenomenon, found in both developed and developing democracies, across political systems and economic contexts.

- South Asia: India exemplifies dynastic politics, with the Nehru-Gandhi family and regional parties like the DMK or Shiv Sena dominated by family leadership. Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka show similar trends.
- Southeast Asia: In the Philippines, families like the Marcoses and Aquinos have long dominated politics, with studies estimating over 70% of legislators are dynastic.
- Latin America: Dynasties like the Kirchners in Argentina and elite families in Colombia and Mexico reflect a colonial legacy of power consolidation.
- United States: Dynastic elements exist in families like the Kennedys, Bushes, and Clintons, aided by donor networks and legacy recognition.
- Africa & Middle East: In Kenya, Uganda, and Syria, dynasties blur the line between democratic elections and authoritarian control.

Common structural enablers include:

- Weak party institutionalization
- Identity-based voting
- High electoral costs
- Lack of intra-party democracy
- Patronage-based politics

These factors make dynasticism a structurally reinforced rather than purely cultural phenomenon.

2.3 Theoretical Relevance:

Dynastic politics challenges core democratic ideals of equal opportunity, competition, and merit-based leadership. A theoretical approach helps uncover not just *who* is related to whom, but *why* dynasties persist.

- **Beyond Empirical Mapping:** Most studies focus on counting dynasts or comparing electoral outcomes. A deeper analysis is needed to understand the structures that enable dynastic entrenchment.
- **Elite Theory & Patronage:** These frameworks reveal how power circulates within narrow circles and how clientelist politics reinforces dynastic continuity.
- **Democratic Norms:** Dynasticism undermines the premise of equal access. If leadership is limited to familial elites, democracy becomes procedural but not participatory.
- **Integrating Macro and Micro Politics:** Theoretical analysis bridges institutional structures (elite control, party systems) and grassroots dynamics (candidate selection, voter loyalty).

3. Elite Theory and Dynasticism:

Elite theory offers a foundational framework for understanding the concentration, reproduction, and persistence of power in political systems. Rooted in classical sociology and political science, elite theory posits that in all societies — regardless of their formal political structures — power tends to concentrate in the hands of a small, cohesive, and self-reinforcing group. Political dynasticism is one of the most visible and enduring manifestations of this elite continuity.

This section explores the classical formulations of elite theory, examines its modern interpretations, and demonstrates how these perspectives provide a robust theoretical basis for explaining why political dynasties not only emerge but thrive in democratic contexts.

3.1 Classical Foundations: Pareto, Mosca, and Michels:

The intellectual roots of elite theory lie in the work of early 20th-century European thinkers, who sought to challenge the democratic ideal of equal political participation.

a) Vilfredo Pareto – Circulation of Elites

In *The Mind and Society* (1916), Pareto argued that history is driven by the circulation of elites. According to him, societies are always divided into two classes:

- A ruling elite that governs, and
- A non-elite that is governed.

While elites may occasionally be replaced or challenged, they are never eliminated — they are simply replaced by new elites. This theory undermines the assumption that democratic systems eliminate elite dominance; rather, they provide new channels for elite reproduction. Dynastic politicians, by inheriting symbolic and material power, represent a clear continuation of this logic.

b) Gaetano Mosca – The Ruling Class

In *The Ruling Class* (1896), Mosca emphasized the role of organization and institutional control in elite formation. He argued that every society requires a small, organized minority to govern a large, unorganized majority. This “political class,” once in power, tends to consolidate and transmit authority within its own ranks — often through kinship ties, mentorship, or patronage.

Mosca’s insights are particularly relevant for understanding how political families convert social and institutional capital into enduring political dominance.

c) Robert Michels – The Iron Law of Oligarchy

Michels, in *Political Parties* (1911), introduced one of the most influential ideas in political sociology: the Iron Law of Oligarchy. He argued that all organizations — even those founded on democratic principles —

inevitably evolve into oligarchies, as power becomes centralized in the hands of a few who control decision-making processes, resources, and organizational knowledge.

This principle is mirrored in modern political parties, where candidate selection, funding, and public messaging are often controlled by a narrow elite — within which dynastic politicians are disproportionately represented.

Together, these classical theorists establish a foundational truth: democracy does not eliminate elites; it reshapes how elites operate.

3.2 Modern Perspectives on Elitism:

Building on classical ideas, contemporary scholars have refined elite theory to account for institutional complexity, cross-sectoral power, and symbolic reproduction in modern democracies.

a) C. Wright Mills – The Power Elite

In *The Power Elite* (1956), C. Wright Mills argued that power in modern societies is concentrated in a “power triangle” composed of political, military, and corporate elites. These actors move fluidly across sectors and support each other’s dominance, often through informal networks and shared class interests.

Political dynasties thrive within this model by combining:

- Political authority (elected office),
- Economic capital (control over party funds or personal wealth), and
- Social capital (elite schooling, media access, and influential marriage alliances).

This intersectionality of power resources enables dynasties not only to win elections but to shape political discourse and party direction from within.

b) Pierre Bourdieu – Capital, Habitus, and Symbolic Power

Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction offers further nuance. In his framework:

- Economic capital provides material advantage,
- Social capital provides access to networks, and
- Cultural capital offers legitimization through elite education, language, and behavior.

Political dynasties often possess all three forms of capital. Moreover, Bourdieu’s concept of habitus — internalized dispositions shaped by social environments — explains how dynastic politicians are socialized from an early age into the rituals, language, and codes of political life.

For example, children of political families may accompany parents to rallies, attend elite schools where political norms are reinforced, and gain early media exposure — preparing them for leadership long before formal candidacy.

c) Neo-Elite Theories and Institutional Access

Contemporary political scientists like Higley and Burton have emphasized how elite cohesion and institutional gatekeeping play crucial roles in elite stability. Political parties, parliaments, and bureaucracies often favor individuals who fit familiar elite profiles — i.e., dynasts — over outsiders, ensuring continuity in both leadership and ideology.

This perspective explains why dynastic politicians often rise not in spite of the system but because of it.

3.3 Application to Dynasties: Elite Self-Reproduction in Practice:

Elite theory, both classical and modern, helps explain several enduring features of dynasticism in democratic contexts:

a) Reproduction of Privilege, Not Disruption

Rather than democratizing opportunity, elections often serve as mechanisms of elite reproduction. Dynastic politicians are more likely to be selected as candidates due to name recognition, easier access to funding, and perceived legitimacy among voters and party elites.

b) Restricted Access to Political Power

New entrants — especially from marginalized communities or without elite backgrounds — face structural barriers such as high campaign costs, weak networks, and party exclusion. As a result, political opportunity becomes a closed circuit, maintained by a small ruling class.

c) Dynasties as Institutionalized Elites

Far from being individual anomalies, political families become institutionalized within parties, often dictating ticket distribution, controlling local leadership, and determining policy agendas.

d) Resistance to Accountability

Dynastic politicians, particularly in weakly institutionalized democracies, are often less accountable to their constituents. Their secure base and name recognition reduce electoral competition, and their embeddedness in elite networks insulates them from scrutiny.

Elite theory provides a powerful lens through which to understand political dynasticism. By revealing the structural, organizational, and symbolic processes through which elites reproduce themselves, it challenges the assumption that democratic competition ensures equal access to power. Instead, it shows that elections are often a site of elite continuity rather than disruption.

4. Patronage Politics and Political Dynasticism:

While elite theory explains the structural roots of dynasties, it doesn't fully capture the everyday mechanisms that sustain them. For that, patronage politics offers a crucial framework — showing how personal relationships, resource exchange, and informal networks uphold dynastic power.

Patronage systems rely on reciprocal relationships between leaders and constituents, where resources are traded for loyalty. Dynastic politicians, with their long-standing presence and networks, are especially equipped to operate as patronage hubs.

4.1 Understanding Patronage Politics:

a) Defining Patronage

Patronage involves the discretionary distribution of resources — jobs, contracts, welfare, etc. — in return for political support. In weak institutional settings, it replaces programmatic politics, shifting voter behavior from ideology to tangible benefit-seeking.

b) Dimensions of Patronage

Patronage manifests in various ways:

- Electoral: Vote-buying, targeted development promises
- Bureaucratic: Appointing loyalists or family members
- Symbolic: Offering recognition or social status

These patterns are particularly visible in rural and low-income contexts, where state access is mediated by political intermediaries.

4.2 Dynasties as Patronage Hubs:

Dynasties thrive by controlling personalized systems of exchange:

a) Inherited Networks

They inherit loyal local intermediaries, bureaucratic connections, and community-specific ties — enabling selective service delivery and electoral dominance.

b) Personalized Development

Development is framed as a favor, not a right. Dynasts position themselves as indispensable brokers between people and the state, creating a dependency loop that disadvantages non-dynastic challengers.

c) Stable Patronage

Parties and voters see dynasts as reliable — resource-rich, electorally viable, and organizationally experienced. This perception reinforces their political longevity, especially in regional and rural strongholds.

4.3 Party Structures and Dynastic Patronage:

Political parties, especially in the Global South, often function as coalitions of families rather than ideological entities — enabling dynastic entrenchment.

a) Candidate Selection

In parties with weak internal democracy, tickets are awarded based on electability, resources, and loyalty — all areas where dynasts excel due to their brand value and legacy connections.

b) Institutional Capture

Over time, dynasties take over party structures — influencing ticket distribution, funding, and promotions. For example:

- India: DMK, BJD, RJD are family-run entities.
- Pakistan: PPP is synonymous with the Bhutto family.
- Philippines: Parties act as dynastic platforms with little ideological grounding.

c) Resource Asymmetry

Non-dynasts lack campaign funds, networks, and visibility. Dynastic candidates have access to wealth, ground-level machinery, and media presence — making electoral competition highly unequal.

Patronage politics explains how dynasties persist at both leadership and grassroots levels. Dynasts endure not due to unique talent, but because of their ability to deliver benefits, command loyalty, and control party apparatuses.

While elite theory explains *why* dynasties emerge, patronage politics clarifies *how* they endure — making both frameworks essential to understanding the full anatomy of political dynasticism.

5. Intersections Between Elite Theory and Patronage Politics: A Composite Framework:

The persistence of political dynasties cannot be adequately explained by elite theory or patronage politics in isolation. While elite theory illuminates the structural and symbolic dimensions of dynastic continuity — such as control over capital, legitimacy, and institutional access — patronage politics reveals the everyday mechanisms through which this dominance is maintained and extended. Together, they form a complementary and interdependent framework for understanding the resilience of dynastic power in both emerging and established democracies.

This section proposes a composite model that synthesizes the insights from both theoretical lenses. It demonstrates how elite reproduction provides the architecture, while patronage politics supplies the engine

that keeps political dynasties functional and durable. It also outlines how this hybrid structure impedes political competition, reinforces inequality, and undermines democratic institutions.

5.1 Complementarity of Structures and Processes:

Elite theory and patronage politics operate on different but interconnected levels of analysis:

- Elite theory provides a macro-structural explanation: how political power is concentrated in the hands of a few and passed through generations via access to capital, institutions, and symbolic authority.
- Patronage politics explains the micro-operational reality: how dynasties interact with voters, mobilize resources, and maintain loyalty through informal systems of exchange.

Their intersection lies in how dynastic elites use patronage as a strategic tool for preserving elite status, and how patronage systems prefer elite actors who can deliver benefits consistently.

Key Complementary Dynamics:

Elite Theory	Patronage Politics
Structural dominance of political families	Operational loyalty through material exchange
Legitimacy derived from lineage and symbolic capital	Legitimacy reinforced by access to benefits and services
Political recruitment favoring insiders	Network survival dependent on continuous resource flow
Reproduction of elites across generations	Reinforcement of clientelism across electoral cycles

Dynasticism is thus the point of convergence where elite continuity meets patronage mobilization. This synergy enables dynasties to outcompete newcomers and entrench themselves within the system.

5.2 Practical Interactions in Political Contexts:

a) Dynasts as Brokers Between the State and the People

In many developing democracies, access to the state is mediated by local intermediaries, often political families. Dynasts act as brokers who connect their constituencies to bureaucratic resources — jobs, licenses, loans, welfare schemes. This clientelistic brokerage role is critical in contexts where state access is otherwise difficult.

Because of their elite position, dynasts can command attention from state institutions; because of their patronage networks, they can deliver targeted benefits. This dual role cements their indispensability.

b) Party Systems That Favor Dynasties

Elite closure within political parties often results in dynasts monopolizing candidate tickets and leadership positions. At the same time, patronage pressures from below (expectations of welfare delivery and job access) compel parties to select candidates who can perform clientelist functions effectively — and dynasts are seen as the safest bet.

This creates a feedback loop:

- Dynasts win elections → strengthen their elite status → expand patronage base → reinforce their indispensability to parties → get renominated.

c) Political Socialization and Long-Term Entrenchment

Children and relatives of political elites are socialized into politics through participation in rallies, exposure to media, and informal mentorships. Over time, these individuals build their own miniature patronage networks, allowing a smooth transfer of power.

Thus, elite reproduction is not simply biological, but involves a systematic cultivation of skills, networks, and visibility — all of which are reinforced by ongoing patronage practices.

5.3 Theoretical Model: Dynastic Reproduction Cycle:

A simplified model of how elite theory and patronage politics interact in dynastic reproduction can be visualized as follows:

Stage 1: Inheritance of Elite Capital

- Name recognition, institutional access, social status
- Symbolic capital from a prominent family legacy

Stage 2: Mobilization Through Patronage

- Use of networks to deliver targeted benefits
- Activation of loyal vote banks through informal channels

Stage 3: Institutional Entrenchment

- Capture of party machinery and constituency structures
- Positioning for leadership or candidature

Stage 4: Reproduction and Expansion

- Family members inducted across levels (MPs, MLAs, mayors, etc.)
- Patronage networks grow stronger with each electoral win

Stage 5: Reinforcement of Elite Legitimacy

- Election victories further validate elite status
- Access to state resources ensures continued clientelist dominance

This cyclical logic of power makes political dynasties remarkably resilient, even in the face of public dissatisfaction or external shocks.

5.4 Implications of the Combined Framework:

a) Suppression of Political Competition

New aspirants without dynastic or patronage capital find it difficult to break into the system. Electoral politics becomes a closed shop, where merit and grassroots activism often play a secondary role to lineage and loyalty networks.

b) Voter Dependency and Distorted Representation

Instead of voting on issues or policy platforms, voters become dependent on dynastic patrons for basic services. This personalizes governance and distorts the representative function of democracy.

c) Institutional Hollowing of Political Parties

As parties become vehicles for dynastic and clientelist interests, they lose programmatic coherence and internal democracy. Factionalism and loyalty-based politics take precedence over ideology or policy innovation.

d) Normalization of Inequality

When elite lineage and access to resources determine political viability, inequality becomes institutionalized — not just economically, but politically. The idea that “anyone can contest and win” becomes an illusion.

The intersection of elite theory and patronage politics offers a powerful, integrative framework for understanding political dynasticism. Elite theory explains the *structure* of dynastic advantage — how power is passed down and legitimized — while patronage politics shows the *function* — how dynasts maintain and activate power in practice.

Together, they reveal that dynasticism is not a deviation from democracy, but a systemic outcome of how power and resources operate in real-world political systems. This combined model underscores the need for political reforms that target both elite closure (e.g., through internal party democracy) and patronage dynamics (e.g., by strengthening universal service delivery and transparency mechanisms).

In the following section, we turn to the normative and political implications of this composite framework — focusing on what dynasticism means for democratic ideals like accountability, representation, and meritocracy.

6. Implications and Critique: Dynasticism and the Crisis of Democratic Representation:

The combined insights of elite theory and patronage politics demonstrate that political dynasticism is not a peripheral aberration but a deeply embedded feature of many democracies. This raises fundamental normative concerns: can a political system dominated by inherited power be truly representative, or does it amount to democracy only in name? Dynastic politics challenges core democratic principles by concentrating power within select families, thereby undermining political competition, equality, and accountability.

One major consequence of dynasticism is the personalization of power. Rather than functioning as institutional representatives accountable to voters, dynastic leaders often derive their authority from family branding and informal control, weakening transparency and institutional checks. This personalization grants dynastic politicians a form of electoral immunity, where loyalty to a family name can override poor performance or corruption, diminishing the accountability function of elections. As a result, representation becomes hollow — symbolically inclusive but substantively disconnected from local needs and citizen interests.

Dynastic politics also directly contradicts the democratic ideal of meritocracy. Access to political leadership becomes highly unequal, as dynasts enjoy advantages in funding, party support, and media visibility — benefits that first-generation or non-dynastic aspirants must struggle to obtain. This entrenched privilege deters capable outsiders, particularly the youth, from entering politics, thereby eroding aspirational politics. Internal party dynamics often reinforce this imbalance, as candidate selection and leadership succession favor familial loyalty over merit or grassroots activism, turning democratic parties into informal aristocracies.

The effects of dynasticism are further complicated by intersectional inequalities of gender, caste, and class. In many South Asian contexts, dynasticism serves as both an obstacle and a gateway for women in politics. While it enables women’s entry by leveraging family networks, it often reinforces patriarchal gatekeeping, limiting their autonomy as leaders. Similarly, dynasties emerging from marginalized communities may appear to represent empowerment, but in many cases, they reflect individual mobility rather than structural transformation. Once in power, these dynasts may align with elite interests and disengage from the struggles of their communities.

Institutionally, dynastic dominance corrodes the integrity of democratic systems. Political parties dominated by families suffer from weak internal democracy, ideological incoherence, and stifled dissent. Over time, dynasties extend their influence into bureaucracies and regulatory bodies, embedding loyalists and compromising institutional neutrality. Furthermore, treating public office as familial inheritance often

normalizes corruption. Informal governance through family networks becomes standard practice, with public resources exchanged through private channels, deepening rent-seeking behavior.

To be sure, some scholars argue that dynasties provide stability and continuity, especially in post-conflict or fragile democracies. Their entrenched networks can help maintain order and deliver governance in ways fragmented leadership cannot. Others point to legacy politics, where dynastic leaders carry the symbolic capital of past achievements, as seen in the Kennedys or the Nehru-Gandhi family. Additionally, dynasts do win elections — often by significant margins — suggesting a degree of popular mandate.

However, these arguments do not negate the central critique: dynasticism systematically restricts democratic choice and entrenches political inequality. Even when dynasties provide stability or symbolic representation, they operate within an exclusionary framework that limits access to power to a select few. Ultimately, dynastic politics undermines democratic ideals by reducing leadership to inherited privilege rather than earned merit. Addressing this challenge requires more than electoral reform; it demands deeper institutional change — from democratizing party structures and ensuring transparent candidate selection to building systems that reward competence and widen political access. Only then can democracy move beyond its procedural form and fulfill its promise of genuine representation.

7. Summary of Theoretical Contributions:

This paper has offered a theoretical framework for understanding political dynasticism by integrating elite theory and patronage politics. It moved beyond empirical accounts of electoral success or family lineage to conceptualize dynasticism as a systemic outcome of uneven access to political capital, institutional power, and informal networks.

Drawing on classical and modern elite theorists — from Pareto and Mosca to Mills and Bourdieu — the paper showed that elite reproduction is a structural feature of political systems. Elite theory explained the concentration and continuity of power among political families and the symbolic legitimacy dynasts enjoy.

Patronage politics complemented this by revealing the mechanisms through which dynasties sustain power — through clientelism, discretionary resource distribution, and party structures that reward loyalty over merit. Dynasts are not just beneficiaries of legacy but active managers of influence and dependency.

The combined framework (explored in Section 5) demonstrated how elite reproduction and patronage politics interact to institutionalize dynastic dominance, restrict political competition, and erode democratic functioning.

7.1 Implications for Democratic Theory and Practice:

The dominance of political dynasties leads to:

- Weak democratic representation, where elections lack genuine competition.
- Entrenched inequality, as inherited privilege substitutes public accountability.
- Deinstitutionalized parties, reduced to family-run entities.
- Erosion of meritocracy, sidelining first-generation leaders.

Even when dynasties allow symbolic inclusion, they often reinforce elite dominance, undermining the democratic ideal of equal opportunity. Dynasticism is not merely a flaw in weak democracies; it is becoming a structural feature across political systems.

7.2 Final Reflections:

Political dynasties are not remnants of tradition but modern adaptations to unequal political systems. They flourish where access to resources, networks, and institutions is restricted, and where democracy functions more procedurally than substantively.

This study argues that dynasties must be viewed as central actors shaping political outcomes and institutions. Addressing their influence requires deep reforms — including internal party democracy, campaign finance regulation, and broader access for new entrants.

Ultimately, democracy must be assessed not just by holding elections, but by examining who competes, who wins, and under what conditions. Political dynasticism remains a powerful and under-theorized challenge to the realization of democratic ideals.

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