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DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

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John Gastil (1994) offers one clear place to start a discussion about democratic political leadership. He summarizes democratic leadership as "behavior that influences people in a manner consistent with and/or conducive to basic democratic principles and processes, such as self-determination, inclusiveness, equal participation, and deliberation" (p. 956). Gastil adds to this definition an emphasis on distributing responsibility, empowering people, and aiding deliberation. He also adds that not all situations are appropriate for democratic leadership, such as when judges are needed or when decisions should be left to individuals' privacy and free choice. He implies that the theories and practice of democratic political leadership comes in many forms because of its many purposes. This chapter will discuss some elements of democratic political leadership before proceeding to sections on theory, applications, comparisons, and future directions for scholarship. Finally, a list of key texts on democratic political leadership at the end of this chapter will offer material for those seeking further resources for studying the concept.

The Elements of Democratic Political Leadership

Leadership has descriptive and prescriptive elements. To understand this difference, one can consider Adolf Hitler and Martin Luther King Jr. Clearly, we may describe Hitler as a leader because of the position he held as head of the German state. At the same time, the wars and genocidal policies that he undertook are inconsistent with what we prescribe for those in leadership. To call people leaders in some circumstances expresses ethical characteristics that we expect them to exemplify or call others to

follow. Martin Luther King Jr. is an example of a person called a moral leader.

Another distinction of descriptive and prescriptive leadership has to do with authority and power. The term *authority* can refer to a position, while the term *leadership* refers to a type of behavior. Others will use the term authority to distinguish good from bad uses of power. Power is neither a good nor a bad thing except in how one uses it. Thus, when powerful people act in accordance with ethical principles that advance the good of society, they are using power in a way that others will deem legitimate and appropriate. Power can be authoritative in a moral sense. We can see, therefore, that when we discuss leadership we actually may be describing authority, formal and informal, and prescribing when the exercise of power by those with authority may be legitimate or illegitimate. These distinctions and the considerations that go into prescribing the values of leadership run as threads throughout the chapters in this entire collection.

Democratic principles accord power and authority to majorities, but the rights of a minority impose limits on what the majority can do. For example, the possibility of a majority voting to remove civil and even human rights from a certain minority of the voters and to exclude them from future participation in government led thinkers as early as Aristotle to believe that democracy, in this sense of majority rule for the benefit of the majority, would be an illegitimate form of government. Democratic political leaders, therefore, have a duty insofar as they are committed to democratic values to uphold the majority's wishes and to protect the rights of political minorities.

When the concept of leadership is understood as a process (prescriptive) rather than as a position (descriptive), it commonly refers to the practice of constructing or reconstructing situations that require public attention.

Generally, vision describes the unity and coherence of a set of values and goals that leadership's specific construction or reconstruction of particular events imply. Vision provides direction for a group and to conceptualize and address a problem held in common. With these characteristics of leadership, majority rule and minority rights, and vision of the common good in mind, we can more easily pick out specifically political leadership and distinguish among its forms.

Political leadership's first task is to distinguish what is public and what is private. John Dewey, an influential U.S. philosopher, argued persuasively that the distinction between what is public and what is private is not hard and fast. For instance, whether a person chooses to wear a blue shirt or a red shirt on a given day is not generally considered a public decision, even if one wears it in public. By contrast, if a person chooses to wear a blue shirt to show membership in the blue shirt political party, then that decision becomes political. Conversely, what one might consider an apolitical choice of clothes, the *hijab* or head covering of Muslim women, might be considered a political act by government officials enforcing laws to promote assimilation of a minority into a majority culture.

The domain of the political concerns all affairs that deal with the interaction of citizens in collective projects whose intended beneficiary is the society in general or whose active agents are publicly called to action. Thus, when parents prepare dinner, they are not in this sense engaging in political action even though buying food and raising children have public consequences. By contrast, when several families find a common need for bridge repairs, they can come together in explicit public action to resolve that problem.

We can call democratic political leadership a social process in which individuals engage public situations or problems to construct or reconstruct ways of thinking about them to debate and address them together in collective action aimed at the good of a majority of citizens while respecting norms of open and fair decision making.

Theory

Democratic leadership may seem a contradiction. Some concepts of leadership are understood as consolidated power and authority. This conception contrasts sharply with democratic values such as the legitimacy of decision making resting on the will of the people served, with feedback mechanism for people to criticize those in positions of authority, and avenues to redress their grievances. With the growth of democratic societies, theories of leadership have emerged to deal with this contradiction in at least two ways. The first concerns leadership that values and advances democracy and its various qualities. The second concerns the process of seeking the actual involvement of people in the processes of leadership. The difference between these two ways of thinking about democratic political leadership

reveals a central conflict between theorists on the matter of citizen involvement. The basic issue is that in nondemocratic societies, persons of privilege and influence are given positions of authority without clear warrant. In democratic systems political positions are open to whomever people deem to be the best persons to lead. However, whether an oligarchy or democracy, those in leadership positions are generally expected to be knowledgeable about the problems they are to address. When we take this outlook, we see a conflict emerge between populist and expert-centered, democratic theories of political leadership. The first emphasizes public access to positions of authority and accountability to majority rule and minority rights and the second, qualifications and skills to get the public's work done.

This conflict between populist and elitist theories of leadership carries with it approaches to education. This motivation can take several forms. In the populist tradition, education is a central element with the goal of ensuring that the general populace is informed, with access to a free press, Internet, adult education, and other grassroots educational movements. An informed public, this theory suggests, means more effective citizen participation and better decision making. With the elitist theory, the educational impetus is on those in authority to raise public awareness and understanding of issues that they are working to address.

Two problems of representation arise when we think of the expert-driven model of democratic leadership. The first is that experts might not come from the communities whom they are to help, and, therefore, they might not be properly motivated to help their constituents. The second problem concerns the fact that individual citizens are often best acquainted with their own particular worries and problems, even if the causes of some of their problems are broad and generalized out of view. The expression that Dewey (1926) used to describe this lesson is that the people know best where the shoe pinches, not the shoemaker (p. 207). Out of this set of concerns about experts versus public participation in decision making comes a common demand for accountability in government, a feedback mechanism and attention to it, and methods for recourse against failing leaders.

One popular way of thinking about democratic leadership that aims to address the problem of representation is servant leadership. Servant leadership is generally valued for its selfless concern for the common good, of which everyone is a trustee, over personal ambition. In one sense, the servant leadership approach is paradoxical. One must struggle to gain office and to proclaim one's talents, skills, and knowledge over another person's—all in the effort to obtain successfully a position of public service. One must have ambition. Plus, these positions of public service may bring with them great influence over others. This apparent paradox finds resolution in the service motivation behind one's ambition and influence that sets apart the servant leadership model.

Similar to the theory of servant leadership, catalytic leadership involves facilitation. Catalytic leadership is directed with the goal of aiding groups in setting, revising, and implementing their own plans. Catalytic leadership must be in some way education insofar as it focuses on raising public awareness of problems. As a catalytic leader, one can facilitate the formation of groups to promote awareness of conditions such as honor killings, domestic violence, or environmental degradation, awareness that in turn frequently affects the level of funding for relevant research and services on the matter. Fundamental to the catalytic leadership model is the view that the force and value of leadership comes from the people whom a catalytic leader enables and empowers with just the right opportunities for interaction with one another in a desirable way.

Servant and catalytic leadership theories offer ways of thinking about inclusiveness of those served and their priority over the leader in public decision making. One element of democratic political leadership can be obscured with this focus, however. Consistent with servant leadership, but more active, is a bolder theory of transforming leadership. Certain leaders do more than simply speak for those who cannot be present in political discourse. The obligation to represent one's constituents is clear, yet often leaders are chosen and looked to for guidance in complex matters. For instance, in the selection of a public university's new chancellor, various constituencies have interests both in representation and in the vision that the new chancellor would bring. One of the ways great chancellors can distinguish themselves, however, is to play roles in the creation of a cohesive picture of the possibilities of their organizations' futures. Transforming leadership is generally well aware of their organizations' histories, strengths, and weaknesses. It sometimes finds an example that their community can follow on a path to excellence, and at other times, they must forge a new vision for their own unique circumstances. Transforming leadership inspires constituents with a reinforcement of profound, shared values that can be furthered with new ways of thinking. This model of leadership can be democratic in both senses: one that inspires and invites growing participation of people in a new vision and one that can be set in such a way that advances inclusiveness, equal consideration, fairness, and enhanced possibilities for people to seek out their mutual self-interest. What is democratic about transforming leadership, however, would have to do with either its involvement of constituents in decision-making processes and/or the pursuit of democratic goals in a shared vision.

In considering theories of leadership, two further worries are worth noting. The first concerns the matter of low citizen participation in politics. The second regards some ethical challenges for leadership. In cases in which participation is discouraged or kept out of the reach of citizens, public systems can seem unjust. Citizens sometimes feel apathetic about public problems, however. It may be that in both cases, greater public participation is better than less, but advocates of the elite or expert models of democratic

leadership question this. Those who are most interested, invested, and educated in social matters are the ones who should decide on political matters, they would argue. Robert Putnam's (1995) famous essay, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," calls for reinvigorating U.S. social capital and civic engagement, yet it reveals evidence of the reasons why expert leadership theorists argue for representative models of democratic leadership that focus more on democratic values than on increased participation.

Democratic elitism brings with it not only civic disengagement but the risks of political alienation. Reconciling apathy and alienation with democracy presents an age-old problem for leadership. If a class of expert leadership must represent people, we encounter the problem that Plato raised in the *Republic*. According to Plato, Socrates and his friends in conversation argue about whether or not it would be acceptable for a leader to commit what he called the noble lie—a deception committed for the greater good. For instance, when asked whether any further concerns are pressing on the president, a communications representative might respond in the greatest interest of the people in such a way that is purposely incomplete. Plato believed that in some cases a leader might be required to lie in order to do the right thing. Of course, lies are acceptable for Plato only in exceptional circumstances. Chapter 79 "Ethics" and Chapter 80 "Deception" take up these issues of ethics and democratic political leadership further.

In leadership theory, one of the most famous warnings for democratic theorists comes from Plato. He explained that the greatest punishment for those unwilling to lead is to be led by those worse than him or her (*Republic* 347c). In this way, Plato warned the democratic citizen of the dangers of not participating in government. Of course, in his day, many categories of person were excluded from participation in public offices. In the 19th and 20th centuries, democratic societies in many countries became significantly more inclusive in opening the offices of public leadership to previously disfranchised and underrepresented groups. Today, therefore, Plato's warning speaks to more and more people. As the doors of opportunity widen, so does the call for public responsibility.

Applications

A wide variety of applications could be listed for thinking about the value and meaning of democratic leadership. First among them is the matter of the conceptualization of problems. When a group is increasingly dissatisfied with its circumstances, often initial steps in leadership are necessary for clarifying and organizing the group's thoughts about what its problems are. The process of facilitating communication between groups can aid both in formulating consensus about shared problems and in raising awareness for those who had previously been ignorant of a group's concerns. In democratic societies, persons hoping

to contribute to community leadership will often organize listening sessions, town hall meetings, and other gatherings. Although members of these groups may complain of the problem of preaching to the choir—in other words, of talking with only those who already agree on a problem—the act of clarifying a group's objectives is crucial before action can be taken intelligently to achieve them.

A further application of democratic leadership concerns the matter of secrecy and lying. This is again the problem of the noble lie that Plato introduced so long ago. In general, democratic values call for transparency, honesty, and full disclosure. In the case of troop movements in times of war, however, we see the dire need to avoid full disclosure about a special set of public details since enemies could benefit and cause our soldiers greater harm. These exceptions are few, though, and are not reason to doubt the virtues of openness and transparency in democratic societies. The idea is that to consent to government action, citizens must be aware of it.

Finally, in applying the principles of democratic leadership, one should consider the conflicts that arise regarding the place of public school education in moral training. How does a society train its citizens in moral behavior apart from religious indoctrination? For instance, Ben Franklin's discussion of virtues in his autobiography is consistent, arguably, with many religious moral teachings, yet it is not founded upon religious texts. This brings us to the topic of civil religion that Chapter 57 examines. Finally, it is important to note some cases in which democratic political leadership is inappropriate. Among these are cases in which members who would participate in decision making are particularly unqualified to the task (Dahl, 1991). Other cases include matters of justice in which a judge is the most appropriate person for deciding a matter of criminal or other legal concern, so as to avoid bias, to ensure expertise in the subject to weigh judicial considerations when those are the kinds deemed appropriate for the decision-making process in question. Finally, in some cases, decisions have already been made and have been tasked to a division of society or of an organization. In such cases, to have a democratic process for designing the procedures of implementation of a democratically decided matter may not be necessary or appropriate. It is inefficient, for instance, to have a committee choose word for word the contents of each sentence of a letter as it is written the first time. Democratic procedures and values may need to go in to deciding on final versions or how changes should be made, but democratic leadership is inappropriate for many levels of implementation (Gastil, 1994, p. 965).

Democratic, Autocratic, and Laissez-Faire Styles of Leadership

Although there are many theories and versions of leadership, democratic political leadership contrasts most sharply authoritarian leadership forms.

Kurt Lewin (1950, p. 12) offers four characteristics of democratic political leadership at the small group level based on two student group exercises he observed. He contrasts these characteristics with four authoritarian versions. In the democratic form, Lewin found the following:

1. All policies a matter of group determination, encouraged and drawn out by the leader.
2. Activity perspective given by an explanation of the general steps of the process during discussion at first meeting (clay mould, plaster of Paris, papier-mâché, etc.). Where technical advice was needed, the leader tried to point out two or three alternative procedures from which choice could be made.
3. The members were free to work with whomever they chose and the division of tasks was left up to the group.
4. Democratic leaders attempted to be a group member in spirit and in discussion but not to perform much of the actual work. They gave objective praise and criticism.

By contrast, Lewin (1950) found the authoritarian leadership had four different qualities:

1. All determination of policy by the strongest person (leader).
2. Techniques and steps of attaining the goal (completed mask) dictated by the authority, one at a time, so that future direction was always uncertain to a large degree.
3. The authority usually determined autocratically what members should do and with whom they should work.
4. The dominator criticized and praised individual's activities *without giving objective reasons*, and remained aloof from active group participation. He was always impersonal rather than outwardly hostile or friendly (a necessary concession in method).

In an earlier essay, Lewin, Ronald Lippitt, and Kevin White (1939) distinguished autocratic and democratic forms of leadership from laissez-faire forms. In the laissez-faire style of leadership, each person is equally free to act independently of the others and the sum of such actions will be the result of individuals' separate actions. Democratic methods show concern for the consequences of such results. In democratic forms of leadership, equality is asserted for access to participation and consideration in setting and carrying out goals. Democratic leaders, therefore, encourage group members to offer each other constructive criticism and ideas for working together to avoid the negative outcomes of independent free action and to render more efficient the process of addressing shared problems. Authoritarian styles assume better outcomes if those with most knowledge and ability are free to establish the norms that govern the group. Lewin's work was at the small group level. As Chapters 9 through 12 in this section make clear, however, striking the right social balance of authority in and freedom of the many and the few has occupied political philosophers for centuries.

The authoritarian style of leadership is famously presented in Plato's *Republic* but Lewin's (1950) list of authoritarian leadership characteristics would not have pleased Plato. Plato believed that societies cannot be just unless their leaders are true philosophers. If leaders do not follow reason and justice, he believed, their society would be doomed to injustice and tyranny whether by the few or the many. Plato is a harbinger of the more elitist theories of democratic leadership. The will of the people was much less important than the just arrangements of society. In the *Republic*, Plato called for a leadership class, the philosopher-kings, who would be educated and prepared for their positions of prominence. At the same time, Plato did not think leaders should have any greater benefits in riches than average citizens, with the exception of their training and greater responsibilities. In his view, the leadership class would have authority because of its intelligence and virtues, not power based on strength—Lewin's first characteristic of authoritarian leadership. For Plato, authoritarian leadership found justification in the benefits everyone incurred when decision makers were the wisest members of society.

Elements of Plato's philosophy that would lead people to classify his point of view as authoritarian concern his willingness to limit a number of personal liberties that today are commonly treasured. For instance, Plato criticized poets and other artists for their ability to deceive people, playing on their passions, pulling them away from their faculty of reason. In the modern philosophical period, many thinkers came to be critical of Plato's split between the passions and reason (Dewey, 1944). Freedom of expression is taken to be fundamental to democratic leadership because of the abuses of authoritarian leadership, which many times in the past silenced the critics of unaccountable leaders.

On the other end of leadership theories, the liberal tradition presents us with a number of theorists who could be classified as *laissez-faire*, leaders who believe in allowing maximum freedom to individuals and who think the only legitimate government is that to which people consent. As mentioned above, Lewin et al. (1939) would distinguish *laissez-faire* forms of leadership from democratic forms, yet adherents to *laissez-faire* forms of government exist in democratic societies. Theories of government in the classical liberal tradition generally call for minimal government. John Locke (1690/1997) is commonly associated with the

liberal tradition that seeks to maximize individual liberties and to limit government. A leadership style developed for a *laissez-faire* government would criticize Plato's inhibiting approach. It would also seek strong limits on the ways in which some citizens can infringe upon the rights of others. An appropriate leadership style to match this outlook would often focus upon procedure rather than on particular vision and substance in political problem solving. The libertarian outlook that seeks to minimize governmental imposition on citizens may or may not be the preferred approach in communities, depending upon the good of the actions that government takes, its necessity, and the processes by which decisions about them are made.

Some leadership theories combine the trait approach of Plato with concern for individual freedom (Antonakis, Cianciolo, & Sternbert, 2001; Bass 1990b; Burns, 1979) provide a middle ground between authoritarian and *laissez-faire* styles. This democratic style resembles the catalytic leadership that we discussed earlier. This form of leadership has four virtues. First, it limits the sphere of obligations that people in positions of authority must decide about; hence, it maintains individual responsibilities. Second, authority has more legitimacy because allowing for a spread of responsibility permits more voices to contribute to decision making, and greater consent of the people impacted by decisions. Third, the spread of responsibility allows more levels of review from the bottom-up as well as the top-down. Fourth, the person in the position of authority can be seen to prevent the negative outcomes of individual actions and to preserve common wisdom rather than as an autocratic leader.

Summary

The different approaches to democratic political leadership, bear common characteristics. In general, it is seen as a kind of process rather than as centered on personalities. It is focused on the public realm of social responsibility. It is also to be undertaken for the benefit of all, with majority rule and minority rights. Education is an important component of its practice, as is the division of responsibilities. Finally, democratic political leadership, even if elitist and expertise-based, serves the public interest; derives its authority from the public; and is accountable to those whom it is intended to serve.

References and Further Readings

Readers seeking further study of democratic political leadership would do well to begin with a reading of Gastil (1994) and then of selections from Gouldner (1950). Those interested especially in democratic principles and values should consult Dahl (1991) and Dewey (1926, 1937, 1939/1998). Readers looking for more on education in democracy and leadership should look to Dewey (1944) and Grabo (1918). For classics of political philosophy, see Arendt (1970), Dahl (1991), Dewey (1926), Locke

(1690/1997), and Plato (1992). For distributed leadership and democratic participation, see Adorno (1950); Bass (1990b); Greenleaf, Frick, & Spears (1996); Putnam (1995); Riley (2003); and Woods (2004). Finally, for anthologies and readers on leadership, see Antonakis, Cianciolo, & Sternberg (2004); Bass (1990a); Gouldner (1950); and Grint (1997).

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