

# Dædalus

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## On Political Leadership

Archie Brown, guest editor

with Nannerl O. Keohane

S. Alexander Haslam & Stephen D. Reicher

Eric A. Posner · Michele L. Swers

Robert Elgie · Eugene Huskey

Barbara Kellerman · Alfred Stepan

Anthony King



# Introduction

*Archie Brown*

The character and quality of political leadership, both in one's own country and in those of others, has huge implications for us all. It is a subject that has been widely studied, but this issue of *Dædalus* takes a distinctively fresh look at it. It appears during an American presidential election campaign that is even more than usually abrasive and which raises questions about the nature and efficacy of political authority. The contributors to the issue come from different disciplines and from different countries.

The geographical scope of the discussion is also wide-ranging, but political leadership in the United States figures prominently. The conflicting roles of an American president, as simultaneously leader of the country, the executive branch, and the party, are examined in Eric Posner's essay, and the U.S. presidency is placed in comparative context in the contributions of Robert Elgie and Anthony King. Michele Swers directs her attention to American legislative leaders and focuses on the notable underrepresentation of women in the House and Senate, whether the comparison is made with women as a proportion of the U.S. population (more than half) or with the proportion of female members of the legislature in other democracies. Swers also identifies the distinctiveness of the policies women legislators espouse and the laws they back, even at a time when the partisan divide between the parties has become sharper.

There has been a protracted debate in political science about the institutional design most conducive to democratic governance. Strong arguments have

*Introduction* been advanced that it is best attained – and also *maintained* – by a parliamentary system, but the empirical evidence suggesting presidentialism is, indeed, a bad idea for fledgling democracies is contradictory. The institutional design actually adopted by many countries emerging from long periods of authoritarian rule is known as *semi-presidentialism*, and Elgie argues that some variants of semipresidentialism are more consonant with the consolidation of democracy than others. There is no getting away from the fact, however, that large-*n* statistical studies find it hard to capture the significance of the quality and style of particular political leaderships as distinct from drawing conclusions based on analysis of their constitutional and de facto powers.

In a democracy there are, and should be, multiple leaders. That the United States has numerous leaders is one of the themes of Posner's essay. He notes that Congress has four: specifically, the top party officers in the House and Senate. Nevertheless, in the course of the twentieth century, the president acquired a leadership and agenda-setting role more capacious than the authors of the Constitution envisaged. Posner's argument that successful leadership "seems to depend fundamentally on the ability of the leader to acquire and maintain the trust of the group" to which he or she belongs fits with the social identity approach of psychologists Alexander Haslam and Stephen Reicher. They are critical of studies that concentrate on the qualities and characteristics of leaders in the abstract, emphasizing that the successful leader is both prototypical of the group and someone capable of mobilizing followers around a collective sense of "who we are" and "what we are about."

Barbara Kellerman is likewise skeptical of any assumption that the individual leader is overwhelmingly important. She emphasizes the necessity of studying the relationships between leader and led and of seeing

them in their social and political contexts. Kellerman takes issue not so much with leadership studies as an area of intellectual inquiry as with the teaching of "leadership development" (or what she calls the "leadership industry"). She observes that during the decades in which the attempt to teach people *how* to be leaders has burgeoned globally, but especially in the United States, leaders in virtually every walk of life, including politics, have fallen increasingly into disrepute. She provocatively suggests that "we do not have much better an idea of how to grow good leaders, or of how to stop or at least slow bad leaders, than we did one hundred or even one thousand years ago."

Political theorist (and leader, as former president of two of America's most prestigious higher educational institutions) Nannerl Keohane underlines, however, the necessity of leadership as an activity, one needed "to protect the vigor and capacity of democratic governments." It is required not only from presidents or other heads of governments but, for example, also in congressional committees, local politics, and education. In addressing the linkage of "Leadership, Equality & Democracy," Keohane shares the concern of a number of analysts that the extremes of economic inequality that now prevail in many advanced countries, and in the United States more than most, engender a political inequality so great as to undermine democracy. If, as other essays in this collection make very clear, there are enormous dangers in a polity in which few, if any, checks and balances constrain a leader, there are hazards of a different kind in a system where the power of money so exceeds the power of the majority of the people, and so limits the actions of political office-holders, as effectively to veto social change. Yet in the absence of leadership that combines passion and pragmatism, the threat posed by "profound socioeconomic inequalities" will hardly begin to be overcome.

A case can be made that the American president – who has a stronger democratic legitimacy than any other actor in the system, having been elected by the whole country (with occasional aberrations caused by the electoral college when, as in 2000, occupancy of the White House went to the candidate who received fewer votes) – should be somewhat less constrained in domestic policy-making than he has been. A multitude of constraints on the presidency is not, however, a problem in the countries with which Eugene Huskey is concerned – quite the opposite. His essay on “Authoritarian Leadership in the Post-Communist World” examines half of the fifteen successor states to the Soviet Union and explores the origins and development of personalistic rule in the region. Several of these states have seen the emergence of monstrous cults of personality, and their presidents, in a number of cases, wield even more individual power than that of a party leader in Soviet times, since – the period of “high Stalinism” apart – Communist rule was generally more oligarchic than autocratic.

If a majority of the post-Soviet states have moved from one form of authoritarianism to another, the same, alas, appears to be true of several Middle Eastern and North African countries in which high hopes for democracy were expressed during the Arab Spring. Even worse, some have been plunged into bloody anarchy and civil war. The one encouraging exception has been Tunisia, whose impressive, albeit still fragile, democratic transition is analyzed by Alfred Stepan. He puts the Tunisian experience in comparative context, noting that in common with the transitions that produced effective democratic leadership in Spain, Chile, and Indonesia, Tunisia has had a multiplicity of cooperating leaders, rather than a single “strong leader.” Successful democratization, he argues, often involves the formation of a powerful coalition that brings to-

gether one-time enemies. This transpired in Tunisia but notably failed to occur in Egypt, Syria, and Libya.

The yearning for a strong individual leader comes under more sustained critical scrutiny in the last two essays in this issue. While an effective government is a requirement of any modern state, this does not necessarily imply a president or prime minister who dominates the entire executive and his or her political party. I argue that within authoritarian regimes, a more collective leadership is a lesser evil than personal dictatorship, and that in countries attempting to escape from authoritarian rule, a collegial, inclusive, and collective leadership is more conducive to successful democratic transition than great concentration of power in the hands of one individual at the top of the hierarchy. In established democracies, too, the quality of governance benefits from dispersed power within the executive, and from members of the top leadership team having no qualms about contradicting the top leader.

Anthony King draws on his long study of the American and British political systems to provide a critique of particular presidencies and premierships. He pays attention also to the interesting case of Switzerland, which, he suggests, has flourished economically and politically in recent times, notwithstanding its linguistic and religious differences and the absence of an instantly identifiable leader. Eschewing such personal dominance has, it would appear, contributed to Swiss success. The occasions in a country’s history when a mighty individual leader is necessary are mercifully rare. A “strong” leader wielding great power at the apex of the political system is liable to do more harm than good. Indeed, King concludes, there is much to be said for a country’s “political culture and institutions having built into them a fair amount of ‘leader proofing.’”