POLITICAL LEADERS: THE PARADOX OF FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY

Líderes políticos: la paradoja de la libertad y de la democracia

Filipe TELES[1]
Departamento de Ciências Sociais, Políticas e do Território
Universidade de Aveiro
Aveiro, Portugal
✉*filipe.teles@ua.pt*

RESUMEN. Se reconoce que el liderazgo político todavía hace la diferencia. Sin embargo, la investigación parece incapaz de ofrecer las herramientas adecuadas para aportar una comprensión mayor y más acertada sobre el tema, sobre todo si tenemos en cuenta las tendencias actuales de la democracia liberal, es decir, su *ethos* igualitario y la personalización de la política. Uno de sus principales características, incluso en las democracias más controladas, con fuertes sistemas de frenos y contrapesos, es el predominio de los líderes asertivos, a quien los votantes miran a la hora de decidir en qué partido votar. Por lo tanto, una evaluación desapasionada de liderazgo político es necesaria para enfocar nuestro análisis. En este artículo se pretende identificar cuál es la naturaleza específica y el carácter distintivo del liderazgo político contemporáneo,

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[1]   Member of the Research Unit on Governance, Competitiveness and Public Policies (Govcopp), and Assistant Professor at the Department of Social, Political and Territorial Sciences at the University of Aveiro. Member of the Steering Committee of the Master in Public Administration at Universidade Católica (Porto).

con el argumento de que el descuido del tema por la corriente principal de la teoría democrática es una consecuencia de una mirada igualitaria que considera el liderazgo político como en conflicto con el *ethos* de la democracia.

Palabras clave: autoridad, democracia, igualdad, libertad, liderazgo

ABSTRACT. It is acknowledged that political leadership still makes a difference. However, research seems unable to offer the proper tools to provide further and relevant understanding on the theme, particularly when we consider liberal democracy's current trends, namely its egalitarian ethos and the personalization of politics. One of its key features, even in controlled democracies, with strong checks and counterweight systems in place, is the dominance of assertive leaders, to whom voters look-up to when deciding which party to vote for. Therefore, a dispassionate assessment of political leadership is needed in order to adjust our analysis. This article aims to identify the specific nature and distinctiveness of contemporary political leadership, arguing that the neglect of this issue by mainstream democratic theory is a consequence of an egalitarian bias that considers political leadership as in conflict with the ethos of democracy.

Keywords: authority, democracy, egalitarianism, freedom, leadership

Stories of power and political leadership are a common theme for writers throughout the history of literature: from Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* to Orwell's *Animal Farm*, literature is impregnated with this theme and its singularities. Leaders are the object of intense admiration, due to their ability to shape the world surrounding them, and their natural capacity to lead and to have malleable followers. Seen as an art, or more recently in history as a science, leadership has always been the subject of examination by thinkers, artists, writers, and researchers.

There is something similar to the innocent delight seen in a child about this issue that spurs us to understand it. It must have value if it is appealing. *The Brothers Karamazov* from Fyodor Dostoevsky put forward one explanation as to why leadership is so important: "There are three powers, only three powers on earth, capable of conquering and holding captive forever the conscience of these feeble rebels, for their own happiness –these powers are miracle, mystery, and authority". The possibility to provide all three at the same time is only achievable by those able to grasp the immense complexity of the art of leadership. The effective leader can offer the *miracle* of bending situations in favour of his own success or of others, and, at the same time, exert *authority* over followers, sometimes under a veil of *mystery* which allows him to maintain an aura of absolute power, only available to great men.

Though these literary perspectives are often closer to our most common and superficial understanding about political leaders, it deserves a more accurate, systematic and cautious investigation, with solid theoretical and methodological instruments.

Political leadership is a complex concept with no universal definition. Political scientists usually define leadership accordingly to their own perceptions of the issue and depending on the aspects they are more interested in. As a result, political science has hardly progressed to a point where it could be identified as a consensual conceptualization and treatment of leadership (Yukl, 2002; Peele, 2005). Every so often it becomes an abstraction –a concept whose meaning is socially constructed and, therefore, contested. It is also related to other concepts, such as 'influence', 'power' and 'authority', which contributes to the large array of competing definitions of leadership –some argue there are thousands (Rost, 1991: 37-95).

The complexity of the definition is aggravated by the multi-arena context of actions in which leaders move around. The exercise of political leadership is done in one or more different environments and often done simultaneously. As Hockin has noted: "even if one definition of leadership were chosen […] the operational meaning of the definition would change depending on the context in which said leadership would be exercised" (Hockin, 1977: ix). Additionally, political leadership conceptualization is highly dependent on the manner in which leaders exercise it, therefore setting high demands on the way scholarship focuses its attention on the analysis of leadership styles.

Besides the fact it depends on context and has different styles, political leadership bears –in its essence– the hallmarks of being a mysterious phenomenon. For instance, for Max Weber, it entails both calculation and risk. Since in politics the means, ends and consequences often are not aligned with one another –as intended– requiring an "active mediation of fate" and an "unpredictable enterprise" (Gane, 1997). Leadership can only be achieved through responsibility and commitment, as "Politics… without belief is impossible" (Mayer, 1950; cit. Gane, 1997). This combination of passion and responsibility, which a political leader must possess, brings about a concept difficult to unravel. Weber's assumption was that leadership "is not a holistic phenomenon which can be reduced to primary properties such as authority or charisma" (Cerny, 1988). However, it is not a mystical or mysterious property (Kotter, 1990): as useful as these personal leadership properties may be, they are the result of complex causes that raise even more questions.

Normative attempts to define leadership, although impossible to avoid, bear the weight of producing diverse and paradoxical results: from the great potential of Neustadt's (1976) 'power of persuasion' in democratic governance to its perversion in tyranny and authoritarianism. The study of political leadership must therefore be made "in a way which is susceptible to both historical and comparative analysis" (Cerny, 1988). Despite the fact it is one of the most intuitively understood phenomena in politics –common sense easily identifies leaders and leadership roles– it is often addressed as a complex multidimensional experience

constrained by several external social structures. Therefore, the concept of po-
litical leadership is particularly difficult to define, since it is often presented as
dependent on institutional, historical and cultural contexts (Blondel, 1987; Wil-
davsky, 1989).

What is political leadership?

Power and authority

As a legacy of the military context, one could be led to consider leadership
as giving orders, interpreted as 'hard power' given by hierarchical, predetermi-
ned and strict institutional structures. However, an overall definition of political
leadership for research purposes, accepting the importance of the situation or
context, must offer a dispassionate and overarching approach to the phenomenon,
aiming to include a complex set of historical and cultural contexts, and all forms
of both 'hard' and 'soft' power (Nye, 2008). More unbiased definitions should
include the general idea of leadership as *the power to exercise power*. Rather than
considering straightforwardly the 'exercise of power', we prefer to consider it as
the 'capacity and possibility to exercise power over others and situations'.

One must agree that power is an equally elusive concept and does not intro-
duce any operational advantage when explaining the concept of political leader-
ship. However, comparatively, it has been well documented, discussed and analysed
throughout human history. Power, as Max Weber's now canonical definition states,
arises from "the probability that one actor in a social relationship will be in a posi-
tion to carry out his will despite resistance". This exercise of control over others is
highly dependent on the leader's ability to accomplish it and on the followers' tacit
approval; in fact, the way to attain an objective is often through other's actions.
Therefore one must consider both dimensions of power: the leader's capacity and
the follower's consent. In the first case, as Bertrand Russell once argued, "Men
like power so long as they believe in their own capacity to handle the business in
question, but when they know themselves incompetent they prefer to follow a
leader" (Russel, 2004[1938]: 9). A leader must, then, select "a particular course
of action and then in some way gets others to go along; or more subtly, the leader
encourages the led to choose the course that the group will follow" (Kellerman,
2004: xiii). These strategies chosen by leaders in order to be successful set what
we will subsequently call 'leadership styles'.

The second dimension of power assumes that followers matter, considering
that leaders are, to some extent, spurred on by their followers. Whether indivi-
duals follow by own commitment, instinct, or through socialization, the impor-
tance of followership has been significantly stressed in recent literature (Hollan-
der, 1993; Kellerman, 2008).

Power sets, therefore, an asymmetrical relation between individuals who
exert it and those who follow its 'guidelines'. This interpretation of power considers

followers as holders of some extent of 'subordination qualities'. Machiavelli used the same argument when stating that a Prince, although powerful, needs the favour and benevolence of the people to keep his position . This feature is, naturally, strongly emphasized in democratic systems.

Even though power is significant in order to understand leadership, not all powerful people are able to lead. In fact, although power is inseparable from the exercise of leadership, concepts are asymmetrical: political leadership implies holding a certain 'amount of power', but the opposite is not true –it is possible to have power (for instance, in hierarchical relations) without being a leader. In this case one can follow Marcus Tullius Cicero's advice –in his "Speech against Piso"– when he considers those things that one cannot attain by *power* yet are accomplished by *authority*. This distinction between both concepts, present in Roman law, is exemplified by another statement by Cicero: "power is held by the people, but authority is held by the Senate". The Latin phrase *senatus populusque romanus*, meaning *the Senate and the Roman People*, translates this relation between both concepts: the senators had positional authority while the people had power. Thus, authority needs to ascribe to a set of norms or acknowledged by others, as contemporary liberal democracies do through their constitutions and laws. Therefore, followers have a certain degree of power in setting constraints on leaders, as exemplified by the French revolutionary Comte de Mirabeau, who once said, "there goes the mob, and I must follow them, for I am their leader".

An individual capacity

Although 'having the authority to exercise power in order to influence the course of actions' presents itself as a more complete picture of the setting needed for political leadership, one still needs to consider that having power and authority does not necessary mean being a leader. So, an individual can have the power and the authority to lead but he still needs something else to be considered a political leader. If *authority* is given by rules, regulations, institutional settings or contextual and historical determinants, someone has to be in agreement or submission –the followers. On the other hand *power* is highly dependent on available instruments, tools and skills, as well as the contextual setting allowing or preventing it from being exercised. Political leadership must consequently fulfil the needed preconditions for both *authority* and *power* –external and internal, or contextual and individual requirements. Therefore, there is also a need for assessing 'leadership capacity'.

A definition of political leadership needs to aggregate these considerations, arguing that it is the 'capacity to exercise power over others and over situations'. Although formal powers and authority invested to individuals in office rarely change during a period of years, one can identify different 'ways' of using it –different strategies to attain political objectives. Therefore, the acts of a leader are dependant on the individuals who hold that position, while the same individual can succeed in one context and fail in another.

Leadership results from this interaction in which the leader is permanently judging his role, the context, the chosen strategy and future changes. Additionally, success depends on the quality and accuracy of the style of leadership chosen. How does the leader exercise power, through which strategy, who is involved and tools used, are decisive in understanding contemporary political leadership. Even more decisive is understanding the mechanisms guiding the political leader to adopt a particular style.

Political leadership in democratic societies

The need for consent

Political leadership is essentially the exercise of seeking consent rather than imposing coercion. This has been the common understanding since Plato's early influential insights expressed in the 'Republic', where he addressed the characteristics and personal virtues required of the ruler. Machiavelli followed this tradition and his 'Prince' also had a set of personal traits which enabled him to succeed. We can also include Thomas Hobbes's 'Leviathan' under the same classification since he focused on the human passions that could induce leaders to jeopardise order and peace.

These aspects has originated two main opposing approaches: the classical one, focusing on the personality traits of influential leaders and of 'great men'; and the contemporary one, seeking a sociological grasp of how leadership is exercised. The first case stimulated examples as Rousseau's Great Legislator, Nietzsche's Superman, and the influential Weberian Charismatic Leader –gifted with an extraordinary quality that enables him to gather followers around him or around a particular objective. Machiavelli gave rise to the 'science of leadership' looking at its core as an expression of an artistic ability, akin to an innate talent. On the other hand, the 'sociological' approach claimed that Weber devaluated the role of followers and of the situational context in which leadership was exercised, arguing an important role for culture and values as key legitimating factors. Accordingly, leadership is seen as more a consequence of the interaction between the individual and his context, rather than a merely individualistic approach to human qualities. This perspective is egalitarian in its assumptions and ultimately recognizes that everyone has the possibility of attaining a position of leadership. This normative –almost creed– approach might help in explaining why contemporary political science has been reluctant to discuss the relevance of political leadership, since it represents two significant anathemas on democratic 'faith': it is a deviation from the ideal of autonomy, as followers are compelled to rally behind others; and it leads to inequality, or at least to social differentiation between those wielding power and those without.

By factoring in the argument stating that leaders may also be able to 'bend' the context and their followers, rather than being mere products of the situation,

one must agree that, more than simple mirrors of external constraints, leaders combine several characteristics that allow them to produce consent around their commanding voice.

An egalitarian bias must have had some influence on the indifference around this theme, as it avoided considering the influence of individuals with the necessary political strength to offer them a determinant role in the public domain. This would mean having the world under the influence of unrestricted and contingencial forces that were able to shape events and, consequently, set unpredictable freedom for political agents. This eventual high degree of contingency would imply eroding tools and theories available to political science, which might have contributed to downgrading the issue. However, its existence –and persistence– with undisputable high visibility of political leaders turns it into an uncomfortable situation and asks for further analysis and systematic interest from social sciences.

Democracies survive its leaders

Political leadership has been neglected in contemporary social sciences, albeit its relevance to human life.

"It is not wise to expect much of political leadership, especially in a democracy" (Firlie, 1968: 58). Statements like this abound in contemporary literature on political leadership. In fact strong leadership is often associated with weak democracies, and, on the other hand, a 'good democrat' seems to be incompatible with the exercise of leadership. Political leadership is, apparently, in conflict with democracy's egalitarian ethos. Democracy will, therefore, never sit comfortably alongside leadership, developing antipathies to its strongest manifestations. However, and also due to this, political science should not have been blind to this phenomenon, and must escape from any gridlocks provided by faith in political equality driven by democracy. Science allows and deserves this unbiased and dispassionate look. This neglect of the issue needs to be corrected as it constitutes a sizeable grey area in our knowledge of how the world operates.

Despite the groundbreaking contributions by Selznick (1957), Barnard (1968) and Burns (1978), much of the discussion has a business-centred, organizational or biographical approach. The last thirty years have been particularly prolific in producing literature on the issue (cf. Femia *et al*, 2009:4 §6), mostly following the same 'pessimistic' path of advocating the need for leadership *even though* living in liberal democracies.

This resistance to leadership rests on a variety of grounds, as claimed by Schlesinger:

> *"on ideological grounds –because this emphasis has seemed to imply that some men should lead and others should follow, a proposition which clashes with the traditional democratic commitment to equality and to majoritarianism… on moral grounds –because it has seemed to overlook the democratic conviction that power*

corrupts… on emotional grounds –because it irritates that populist strain in democracy which often includes an envy of superior persons". (Schlesinger, 1982: 4)

Probably its existence in democratic societies is an uncomfortable fact because it redirects our attention to the general distrust towards politicians, and might comprise the argument that leadership in democracies must have something antidemocratic about it, when the rule of law is menaced by the rule of some men. More democracy implies more suspicion towards power (cf. Warren, 1999). This distrust can be understood as a 'power of prevention' (Jouvenel, 1966) which gives authorization to different forms of veto to prevent excessive power from leaders. Nonetheless researchers argue that leadership is decisive to good governance and that it needs powerful and creative figures that give the necessary direction to policymaking (John and Cole, 1999).

Two dominant strands of argumentation are common: one emphasizes the importance of effective leadership, and the other highlights the involvement of the community. Although apparently diverse, its complementarity is possible and required if governance mechanisms are to work properly (Haus and Heinelt, 2005).

Leaders survive democracies

Several authors, including Karl Popper, feel the necessity to deal with the 'problem' of political leadership. This hostility was inflamed by the impact of strong leaders like Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, Franco, and Salazar in European twentieth century history. Popper disputes Plato's question as to who should rule since, as he argues, the question itself leads to some dangerous answers. In "The Open Society and its Enemies", Popper expresses this point thus:

"[…] Plato created a lasting confusion in political philosophy… It is clear that once the question 'Who should rule?' is asked, it is hard to avoid some such reply as 'the best' or 'the wisest' or 'the born leader' or 'he who masters the art of ruling' (or perhaps, 'The General Will' or 'The master Race' or 'The industrial Workers' or 'The People'). But such a reply, convincing as it sounds –for who would advocate the rule of 'the worst' or 'the greatest fool' or 'the born slave'?– is… quite useless". (Popper, 1945: 120)

The author does not intend to exclude the exercise of leadership in contemporary politics, since –as he admits– it is necessary. However, his unease is addressed to the inevitability of men in leadership positions acquiring more power and influence, beyond any measurable control. Therefore the correct question –obviously different from Plato's– would be "how can we organize political institutions so as to minimize the damage caused by bad rulers?" (*ibidem*: 121). Thus, political leadership becomes a 'problem' one needs to control: a necessary evil of democracies whose main merits is the possibility of removing leaders from power without bloodshed.

An understandable problem, given Isaiah Berlin's perspective, since the extent of the exercise of the leader's power, particularly under the State's institutional umbrella, may lead to uncontrollable authority. His focus on political leadership derives from his opposition to determinism in history, arguing that "greatness is a romantic illusion –a vulgar notion exploited by politicians or propagandists, and one which a deeper study of facts will always dispel" (Berlin, 1980: 32). His recognition of the role played by political leaders in shaping history defies all scholarship approaches against political 'greatness':

"A great man need not be morally good, or upright, or kind, or sensitive, or delightful, or possess artistic or scientific talent. To call someone a great man is to claim that he has intentionally taken (or perhaps could have taken) a large step, one far beyond the normal capacities of men, in satisfying, or materially affecting, central human interests". (idem: 32)

Isaiah Berlin, particularly on 'The Hedgehog and the Fox', offers a distinction between those leaders who see life as a simple dichotomy, easily understandable and tractable, promoting intense followership and even fanatical idealism, resembling Weberian charisma, and the leader to whom an intelligible pattern can be found and where action can be taken, even when the world is seen as a complex composite of events. The first type of leader, prone to offer utopian solutions, tends to "attract their followers by the intensity and purity of their mind, by their fearless and unbending character, by the simplicity and nobility of the central principle to which they ascribe to, by the very fact that they espouse a clear pattern " (Berlin, 1953: 186). The second type is flexible and adaptable to the political context, aware of the complexity of the world but still able to understand and offer a coherent path.

A dispassionate assessment of political leadership –such as this one aims to be– shifts the focus of analysis: from the qualities of particular individuals, their intentions, perspectives and preferences, to the way they actually performs their role.

Who is the political leader?

The personal factor

Weber focused on Plato's fundamental question of 'who should rule', therefore examining the qualities and abilities of the ideal leader. Leadership occupies a central place on the author's rationale, being fundamental for understanding politics. Again the theme of power is what drove Weber's attention, particularly as it derived from the 'monopoly of legitimate physical violence' allowed to modern states. Therefore, as Weber claims, "anyone engaged in politics is striving for power, either power as a means to attain other goals (which may be ideals or

selfish in nature), or power for its own sake, which is to say, in order to enjoy the feeling of prestige given by power" (Weber, 1994: 310-311).

This 'great men' approach to political history was severely undermined by theorists to whom social events were better explained by exogenous power forces which shaped the context in which one acts, and ultimately diminishes individual capacity to 'shape' it. Authors like Hegel, Marx and Durkheim saw leadership as transmission belts for these controlling social forces. This structuralist thinking on social causation undermined an agency approach to political leadership, which diluted its explanatory significance. However, the example of Political Psychology –a growing field of research in Political Science ('t Hart, 2010)– sets another perspective, as argued by Donald Searind and Marco Steenbergen:

> *"Political psychologists reject such one-directional models where the behaviour of leaders is determined by institutional settings. In their view, institutions circums-cribe behaviour but do not dictate it. Structure and agency are interdependent, not institution-determined. And their interdependence is negotiated (and can be mani-pulated) by the political actors involved". (Searind and Steenbergen, 2009: 134)*

Much of the extant literature on political leadership still follows the 'great men' approach, and is mainly focused on figures like Alexander the Great, Cesar, Napoleon, Stalin and Hitler –this does not provide much insight on leadership processes under liberal democracies. Although relevant as it refocuses the re-search objective on political leaders, this perspective is not actually helpful when seeking to fathom what is the specific nature and distinctiveness of contemporary political leadership. The relatively small number of scholarly work done within this particular context is mostly comparative, and often focused on particular historical individuals (Jones, 1989; Elgie, 1995).

The so-called 'elitist' theory of democracy –with Pareto, Mosca and Schum-peter– brought the issue back to the attention of political thought during the twentieth century. Although challenged by strong and militant 'anti-elite' thinkers such as Carole Pateman (1970), it allowed going beyond what Schumpeter called the classical approach to democracy as the self-rule of people, which burdened leadership with distrustful connotations.

Weber's *Führerdemokratie* –leader democracy– was developed as a concept during the birth of the professionalization of politics, the spread of bureaucracies and the growth of mass democracies, during the early twentieth-century. Weber argued that charismatic leaders were expected to dominate over political repre-sentatives, bureaucratic professionals and political parties. This depiction resem-bles not only the above-mentioned 'elitist' theory, but is also applicable to current trends in democracies. One of their key features is the ascendancy of assertive leaders, to whom voters look to when deciding what party to vote for (Pakulski and Higley, 2008).

One must admit that the personal factor on the equation of leadership is not as relevant as it was in absolutist or oligarchic forms of government, particularly

when we examine liberal democracies where the main concern is to balance the power of those with formal institutional authority. In fact, controlling power has been the underlying apprehension of those who analyse constitutional arrangements. However, the relevance of political leadership is not confined to the extent of personal rule. One does not need to go all the way with Carnes Lord when arguing that "the theory of democracy tells us the people rule. In practice, we have leaders who rule the people in a manner not altogether different from the princes and potentates of times past" (Lord, 2003: xi), but it remains true that even in strongly controlled democracies, with tight systems of checks and balances, political leadership still makes a difference.

Personalization of politics

Exercising leadership is a fundamental form of political agency even in contemporary democracies. Political leaders have an important role in creating alternatives and displaying opportunities to choose between rival strategies for the public realm, particularly if one considers how limited is collective action based on citizens' preferences (as shown by Arrow's voters paradox and Downs' focus on collective ignorance). This shift from looking at democracy as presenting the opportunity to aggregate citizens' preferences to a participated way of selecting leaders represents a major change in the analysis of the role of political leadership. More than *responsive* to situations and individuals, this meant leaders are *responsible*; political representation comprehends the exercise of top-down *guidance and influence*, rather than simple *mirroring* of preferences and interests; the political process rests on *persuasion* more than *bargaining*; political motivation and action derive from *will*, rather than collective negotiation and consensus.

The ever growing complexity of contemporary governance, threatened by incomplete information for decision-making, and reinforced by multi-level and multi-organizational agents competing in the public arena, restores an important role to be played by political leaders. In essence, political leadership is agency, since, as Lewis Edinger claims:

> "[…] he is loved, admired, respected or feared, because he can coerce, persuade or manipulate group members, because he can offer psychic as well as material rewards and punishments, or because compliance with his wishes is sanctioned by behaviour norms rooted in law, habit or tradition". (Edinger, 1967: 5)

Accordingly, a prominent feature of contemporary politics has been the 'personalization of politics' (Karvonen, 2010) –the role of politicians as individuals is strengthened as a way of determining how people view and express their preferences. As Bernard Manin claims:

> "People vote differently from one election to another, depending on the particular persons competing for their vote. Voters tend increasingly to vote for a person and

no longer for a party or a platform. This phenomenon marks a departure from what was considered normal voting behaviour under representative democracy […]. Analysts have long observed that there is a tendency towards the personalization of power in democratic countries". (Manin, 1997: 219)

While parties were seen as expressions of preferences and choices, as a function of citizens' affiliation to such groups (Mair, 2006: 371), with the weakening of these structures, collective loyalties and identities were undermined The subsequent 'personalization' of politics is a consequence of a process of individualisation of social life, technological modernization, changes in social structures, and media becoming the central channel of political information (Karvonen, 2010: 4).

Following Rahat and Sheafer's (2007), McAllister's (2007) and Kaase's (1994) research, Lauri Karvonen presents a set of changes that result from this process: 1) institutions stress individual politicians rather than collectives; 2) electoral campaigns and propaganda are increasingly centred on individual candidates; 3) politics is perceived as a competition between leaders, more than organized collective interests; 4) political preferences and choices are form mainly on the basis of their evaluation of individual political actors; 5) these choices may decide the outcome of elections, and ultimately 6) "power relationships in politics and society may come to be decided on the basis of the individual characteristics of politicians" (Karvonen, 2010: 5).

As John Horton (2009, 20-27) mentions, neglecting the theme has some important consequences. The first is the indifference towards the exercise of political power. Power, as seen before, is an integral part of the exercise of leadership and must, therefore, be taken into account, as it is a particularly sensitive theme under democratic regimes. Secondly, it leads to a devaluation of politicians, which seems to conflict with the perspective of democracy requiring good leadership if it is to function effectively.

The role of political leaders

Is the relationship between civic participation and an effective representative system through political leaders actually possible? As Lindblom's (1965) early work demonstrated, effective governance is generated through citizen participation. It helps overcoming implementation issues and contributes towards legitimate action (Heinelt, 2002). Also Jessop (2002) assumes that participation counter balances eventual failures of hierarchical, top-down leadership. This difficult equilibrium can be reinforced by improving accountability in the democratic process and ascribing and defining leaders' roles (Getimis and Heinelt, 2004).

In a democratic society, three broad political leadership functions have been identified (Elcock, 2001; Fenwick, Elcock and McMillan, 2006): 1) *Governing* as a way to improve coordination and to provide strategic leadership –leaders must be capable of generating policy ideas through negotiation and communicating them through the organization; 2) *Governance* as the result of the complexity of

the surrounding context of government –government authorities with their wide range of functions are expected to relate with other public authorities and private organization, developing partnerships and networks of policy delivery and deliberation; and 3) *Allegiance* as the commitment seen towards their supporters. Though this function emphasises the need for mutual identification between leaders and followers, leadership requires adaptability, particularly in contexts, as Heifetz (1994) suggests, where leaders identify incongruence between followers' values and their actual situation. These discrepancies require from leaders the capacity to stand out –being assertive– in order to offer a solution. The problem of the allegiance role is that leaders must ensure that they keep their formal position without jeopardizing their vision for the organization: "leaders must ensure their survival" (Elcock, 2000). This Machiavellian temptation may eventually transform a leader into a mere manager of citizen expectations and preferences, undermining the very essence of leadership. That is why "achieving the vision, the programme, the manifesto requires […] that leaders act in ways that will render them at least temporarily unpopular" (Elcock, 2000).

Although several different roles are expected from democratic leaders, according to the political environment in which they are operating, the four main ones are: maintaining organizational cohesion; representing, defending and gaining support from the external environment for the organization; adapting the organization to the changing needs of the context; and defining its tasks and directing it to achieve its ends (Isaac-Henry, 2003).

What differentiates political leadership?

Literature on leadership with a public sector focus, and particularly within the framework of political leadership, is just a fraction of that seen in the private sector. The first main question which needs to be answered is to what extent political leadership possesses different characteristics when compared to other kinds of leadership, like business or military, for instance.

On an effort to provide understanding about public leadership, Paul 't Hart and John Uhr consciously provided a very interesting introduction explaining why the book they were editing was organized regarding three main key questions: leadership as an object of study, as a democratic design issue and as both a solution and a problem ('t Hart and Uhr, 2008: 1-2). This option, more than merely providing an editor's perspective, unveils the main dimensions of contemporary research approaches to the theme. The first aims to provide an answer to what is political leadership, how it is differentiated from other kinds, and how to conceptualize it. The second approach seeks effectiveness, particularly through presenting which mechanisms are at stake in democratic contexts that provide leadership with a specific role, and –vice-versa– which is the role of political leadership in providing effectiveness to democratic processes. The third perspective is focused on the problems political leadership faces in contemporary governance (how it

can adapt, which style is more effective), and also how can political leadership be considered as a problem in such contexts (particularly regarding accountability and legitimacy).

Leadership is a paradoxical phenomenon: it is admired yet controversial, respected and often ridiculed, explainable but uncertain, relevant, yet blamed by so many. This seems to be particularly true when it is about *political* leadership. It encompasses all those activities and interactions between individuals, which are taking place due to a particular setting of power, legitimacy or influence gap between them. The distinctive functions performed by those who exercise leadership, as claimed by 't Hart and Uhr, are needed "in order for a policy to govern itself effectively and democratically, [and] are not performed spontaneously by a policy's public institutions, organizations and routines" (idem: 3). There is always an answer to the classic question of "who governs?" –another relevant concern of scholarship. The role of 'those who govern' provides answers to the importance of political leadership in supplying guidance and orientation to the policy.

As we have seen previously, the nature of leadership tasks sets out new problems in the political science literature. Several models have been produced do satisfy the need to explain what are the functions of leaders and how they perform their roles. Larsen (1999) expands on this issue by stating that even the concept of role is not clear within the discipline of political science. Roos and Starke's (1981) describe three definitions of roles which set apart the different contributions to this theme. Scholarship must distinguish *role*, as the normative pattern, from *style*, as the actual behaviour (the consequence of performing a role).

Concluding… on the roles of a political leader

One of the major debates that shaped both leadership theories and research agendas was the need to understand if leadership made a difference. Burns recalls the cynical story of the Frenchman observing the crowd during the revolution, saying: "there goes the mob. I am their leader. I must follow them!" (Burns, 1978: 265). In suggesting that we often place too great an emphasis on the effects of leaders' actions, Burns directs our attention towards their roles.

Which roles are expected from leaders? Storey's (2004) three meta-capabilities are interesting when drawing the big picture. The first role of a leader is a result from his capacity to 'make sense of the big picture'. The second role derives from the ability to make change happen. The third one is inter-organizational representation. The first two capabilities can be summarized as resulting from leaders' *awareness* and *sense of autonomy*. In fact, the ability to 'understand', 'read', and 'translate' the complex context where he lives in –*being aware*– is a fundamental role of the leader, at least it is something that is expected from leaders (cf. Isaiah Berlin's 'The Hedgehog and the Fox'). His capacity to translate this into change is only possible if the leader has the real possibility to do so and if he believes he can do it: therefore, it boils down to if he feels that he has the autonomy to actually implement change.

This agenda goes beyond simple supervision, as it goes above and beyond management (Elcock, 2000; Kotter, 1990). According to Lord and Maher (1991) the essence of leadership is being perceived as a leader by others, as for management involves a set of tasks that are associated to a particular organizational position. House *et al* (1996) define leadership, in this same sense, as "the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organizations of which they are members". This clearly goes beyond the expected roles of someone who simply occupies a particular position in an organization. This kind of actions and consequences of actions are only expected from those perceived as leaders (Komrad, 2000).

For instance, if one focus on the extensive literature on local governance, one finds several examples of research on leadership roles. As seen in Olivier Borraz and Peter John's work: "the leader's function is to create forms of cooperation between individuals or groups by helping them forge stable conceptions of their role and identity, in order for them to engage in a collective action bearing meaning" (Borraz and John, 2004). To do so, the "effective modern leader recognises the value of decentralising authority not just to officers but to citizens as well (Burns *et al*, 1994)."

According to Howard Gardner, leaders, "by word and/or personal example, significantly influence behaviour, thoughts, and/or feelings of a significant number of their fellow human beings" (Gardner, 1995). Jo Brosnahan, focusing on leadership in the public sector, sees it as "that special mix of qualities that include integrity, vision, the ability to inspire others, a deep awareness of self, courage to innovate, and an instant and impeccable sense of judgement" (Brosnahan, 1999). A more complete description of leaders' tasks was presented by Thomas Lenz:

"Involves diagnosing situations, determining what needs to be done and marshalling collective effort to achieve a desired future or avert significant problems [...]. It entails the use of power and persuasion to define and determine the changing [...] problems and opportunities [...] of an organization, and the solutions produced and actions taken by individuals and groups both inside and outside an organization to cope with such issues [...]". (Lenz, 1993: 154-155)

Regarding specifically the case of political leadership, Dennis Kavanagh (1990: 63-65) contrasted *reconcilers* with *mobilizers*. The first case deals with those who seek consensus between different cultures and political parties, in order to attain stability and reconciling opposing interests. On the other hand, *mobilizers* offer a particular way of achieving policy goals. They offer vision in conditions of crisis and dissatisfaction, defining an agenda and inspiring followers to seek the same path.

Disillusion with politics in western democracies is often related with government detachment from the people and due to an increasingly inability to deliver the desired changes. Whenever *mobilizers* appear –as they must present a different style from that of the *reconcilers*, whom people often see as mere 'managers in government'– great expectations and general hope are more visible: Barack

Obama's political campaign might constitute a good example of this transformation. In fact, in politics, Paul Joyce says, "it is important to recognize the capacity of politicians in creating strategic visions" (Joyce, 2003). They are expected to articulate and offer vision to their followers.

These patterns are useful to understand expectations around the work of leaders, and the reasons behind their roles. However, as a consequence of the – almost exclusive– normative approaches to these previous issues, we claim that further developments in political leadership theory are more prone to happen as a result of delivering better understanding on leadership styles, rather than continue to explore leaders' roles.

The move to a leader-centred democracy implies, first of all, that political theory and research must concentrate on leaders, offering a better portrait of contemporary politics. On the other hand, leadership studies must be released from their disproportionate focus on 'great men' and from a certain kind of 'leader cult'. This will allow for a better understanding of the 'normal' political realm of contemporary democracies. It must produce new answers to the new challenges of governance, particularly when identifying the role of political leaders in these complex political contexts, where several other agents are called into action, and multilevel and multi-territorialized public and private organizations take part on the public policy process. Finally, political science must offer unbiased approaches to the role of political leaders in democracies, particularly offering the framework which will allow understanding their strategies, their power to influence, their motivations, and their constraints.

This article intended to identify what is the specific nature and distinctiveness of contemporary political leadership, arguing that the nature of the task sets new problems for political science and requires new approaches.

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