

SETTING THE TONE AT THE TOP – POWER AND PERIL OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Thomas Bryant

Department of Social Sciences, IU – Internationale Hochschule, Campus Erfurt (Germany)

Abstract

Political leadership is analyzed as a complex interplay of individual characteristics, social psychological mechanisms, and institutional frameworks. It becomes apparent that power does not result solely from formal position, but also from the perception of objectives and the reaction of the public. Leadership is understood as a behavioral concept that encompasses activities that influence and coordinate the actions of others. The importance of emotional competencies and authentic behavior is emphasized, as is the role of power distribution and institutional structures. Historically, the understanding of political leadership has evolved from personalistic approaches to processual and interactionist models that integrate normative and biological factors. Social psychological aspects such as authoritarianism, peer pressure, and diffusion of responsibility shape leadership processes and influence the quality of political decisions. Influence processes and communication are closely linked to cultural and institutional contexts and require bidirectional interaction. Ethical responsibility and self-reflection are essential for sustainable political leadership, especially in crisis situations that require flexible role understandings and integrative strategies. Finally, it is emphasized that political leadership is always caught between individual agency and systemic constraints and requires a continuous balance between efficiency, legitimacy, and moral integrity.

Keywords: *Political leadership, social identity theory, emotional contagion, legitimacy, governance.*

1. Introduction

A significant part of leadership research considers political leadership to be a behavioral concept. Today's understanding of leadership in this context emphasizes that it involves activities that directly influence and coordinate the actions of others (Helms, 2014, p. 3). This view differs from older models, which focused more on structural factors. The emphasis on behavior opens up space for analysis of how social psychological mechanisms (e.g., peer pressure and diffusion of responsibility) shape the dynamics of these leadership processes.

Political leadership aims to shape the decision-making process and thus to exert a lasting influence on public affairs (Helms, 2014, p. 5). This embedding makes it clear that isolated psychological considerations remain insufficient if they do not take the socio-historical framework into account. Emotional competencies also play a significant role: if they are lacking in leaders, creative processes and coordination within teams become more difficult. Without awareness of the emotional level, genuine exchange between leaders and followers in the sense of collective problem solving can hardly take place. This insight underlies more recent concepts such as "authentic leadership", whose positive effect has been empirically confirmed (Lewkowicz & West-Leuer, 2016, p. 41). Emotionally sensitive behavior thus appears not merely as an additional characteristic, but as an integral part of effective political authority. Parallel to this, the concept of power distribution is at the center of some approaches: weaker leaders are more inclined to resort to harsh measures rather than persuasion. Targeted delegation of decision-making authority, on the other hand, can increase satisfaction at different levels of an organization.

It should also not be forgotten that politics always remains a "human business". Psychological factors such as sympathy or antipathy toward certain schools of thought, as well as the subtle tension between visible and actual power, have a considerable impact on the scope for action (Maizière, 2009, p. 3). This suggests that political leadership should be viewed less mechanistically and analyzed more in terms of its network of relationships between advisors, decision-makers, and the public. In a similar vein, it is emphasized that successful political leadership is often based on a clearly formulated personal core framework consisting of priority messages to internal employees and external audiences (Merton, 1969, p. 6). Such clearly defined lines of communication have been shown to serve as a reference system guiding

action for internal teamwork and external consulting situations (Bowman, 2023, p. 6), which underscores the functional value of an explicit self-image. In the context of professional politics, it is emphasized that this personal core framework is by no means static; it develops from repeated reflection on core messages to employees, media representatives, and voter groups, as well as from a conscious distribution of tasks within the team (Courpasson, 2017, p. 372).

2. Conceptual and historical foundations of political leadership

The historical development of political leadership concepts has been strongly influenced by the social, cultural, and scientific trends of their respective eras. In the 19th century, a view dominated that was significantly influenced by thinkers such as Thomas Carlyle and Francis Galton. This early phase is often described as the “great man” approach, which assumed that leaders possess innate abilities and personality traits that propel them into leadership roles based on their supposed individual talent and regardless of context (Nahavandi, 2015, p. 56). In the early 20th century, the introduction of systematic testing procedures to measure individual characteristics (e.g., intelligence) led to a new interest in the supposedly measurable prerequisites for leadership (Nahavandi, 2015, p. 56). Here, psychological research was combined with organizational needs for efficient selection procedures for management personnel. Since the 1970s, leadership has no longer been seen as a one-sided process, but as a dynamic interaction between the motivations of both parties (leadership and followers) under certain historical circumstances.

Political leadership concepts arise within the sphere of influence of individual characteristics, normative ideas, and institutional structures. While early models were strongly personalistic (Nahavandi, 2015, p. 56), modern approaches have supplemented this view with procedural and interactionist components, while also integrating biological and cultural factors (Pederzini, 2019, p. 26). In addition, recent studies on the learnability of leadership reveal a tension between genetic disposition and the targeted teaching of practical skills (Fliegau, 2009, p. 7). The fact that such discussions partly draw on older lines of research – such as “trait theories” like the “five-factor model” – also shows their continuing relevance despite criticism of their limited explanatory power for situation-dependent behavior (U.S. Army War College Press & U.S. Strategic Studies Institute, 2014, p. 8).

In current leadership research discourse, authentic behavior and emotional sensitivity are often called for in order to generate trust and ensure social cohesion (Lewkowicz & West-Leuer, 2016, p. 129). Authenticity distinguishes sustainable leadership relationships from purely instrumental power relationships. This aspect comes to the fore especially when negative social-psychological mechanisms such as excessive authoritarianism or excessive peer pressure threaten to inhibit constructive processes. It should be noted that modern political leadership is partly moving away from classic terminology and is increasingly being described using the concept of “steering”. This is understood as a process oriented toward the common good within a hierarchical framework of conditions and combines persuasion techniques with institutional regulations (Kevenhörster & Laag, 2024, p. 54). In this context, it is interesting to note the empirical evidence that for a long time, research simplistically assumed that “leaders lead” and “followers follow”, while more recent approaches emphasize a more complex interplay between the two roles (Riggio, 2017, p. 277). This shifts the focus to dynamic interaction patterns in which leadership is not understood as a one-sided top-down process, but as a multi-layered relationship between actors with mutual influence. Leadership is always a process of intentional influence within a social system with the goal of collective action control.

3. Socio-psychological foundations and mechanisms of political leadership

Modern successful political communication requires bidirectionality: listening and seriously engaging with arguments lends depth and credibility to leadership interactions (Koenig, 2009, p. 7). In addition, nonverbal signals such as voice or body language significantly influence the perception of a leader. These elements indicate that leadership is not solely rational and structural in nature, but always has a sensory and symbolic effect as well.

The role of emotional communication is particularly revealing. Positive emotional signals – such as evoking shared hope or confidence – often have a stabilizing effect on the relationship between leaders and followers. The theory of emotional contagion postulates that such signals can be picked up and amplified by group members. However, this pattern is not universal: under certain conditions, opposite effects occur, for example when excessive optimism is perceived as dishonest. Negative communication, on the other hand, can weaken cohesion, even though it may mobilize people in the short term. Communication strategies often suffer from the fact that decisions are first made in isolation and only then “sold” (Fackelmann, 2009, p. 297). A process-oriented approach, on the other hand, involves relevant actors in decision-making discussions from the outset. This creates channels for feedback before political

measures are decided upon. This increases credibility, reduces resistance, and at the same time shapes a culture of internal communication. However, such participation also requires clear and concise communication of information on the part of the manager.

Media presence also influences the perception of political actors' personal characteristics. In the past, this was attributed almost exclusively to the routines of traditional media (Korte, Florack & Kamps, 2022, p. 155). Today, digital platforms enable direct communicative interactions between political decision-makers and citizens – both during election campaigns and during periods of government. As a result, personal branding is less dependent on traditional news channels and more strongly influenced by individual online communication.

4. Integrative challenges and practical implications of political leadership

The responsibility of political leadership begins where formal power is translated into everyday decision-making processes. This responsibility includes not only compliance with legal norms, but above all consistent adherence to ethical principles, even if short-term political advantages may seem tempting through their disregard. A key problem here is the decline in individual ethical sensitivity, which in certain political contexts is considered to be the cause of poor decisions and poor quality of government. This is particularly acute in fragile states, where institutional structures are already weakened and the personal integrity of leaders plays a decisive role in stability and legitimacy.

Based on her experiences in post-conflict Liberia, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf has emphasized that a solid ethical foundation is essential for building sustainable leadership skills (Rufyikiri & Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 2020, p. 11). Her comment suggests that ethics should not be considered an optional extra in leadership behavior, but rather its foundation. From this perspective, there is a need for comprehensive educational programs on leadership ethics that embed value orientation in the training of future political decision-makers.

When leaders disregard justice or the common good, those they lead perceive greater inequality, which in the context of organizations promotes deviant behaviors such as cynicism and refusal to work. Such dynamics undermine the creativity and self-esteem of members and weaken the overall structure of an organization, even to the point of rendering the state incapable of action. From a social psychological perspective, this ethical dimension is closely linked to mechanisms such as “abusive supervision” – forms of abusive leadership in which power is used to harm subordinates.

Constellations without effective control and disempowerment procedures for top positions are particularly risky. If there are no external corrective mechanisms – such as independent control bodies or formalized feedback processes – undesirable developments can continue almost unchecked. Institutional instruments such as term limits or transparent dismissal procedures play an important role here in limiting the abuse of power and demanding accountability.

Ethics in political leadership is also strongly linked to self-reflection. Discrepancies between personal and organizational values can create serious conflicts. The ability to control personal preferences in favor of a binding code of conduct is crucial for living integrity. Without this self-discipline, it remains difficult to credibly convey moral standards or demand them from subordinates.

Another area of tension is that even formally democratic systems are not immune to authoritarian temptations. Where ethical self-examination is lacking, power can become subjectively distorted over time – through constant approval from those around you or through the isolating effect of hierarchical structures (confirmation bias). The risk lies in one-sided decisions being made without careful consideration, with advice or opposing opinions being ignored. Without consciously opening up decision-making processes, dysfunctions such as poor information flow or resistance at the grassroots level can arise.

Ethical responsibility also means carefully examining one's own values in relation to society. Moral ideals can act like dogmas. They must therefore be continuously questioned to prevent them from mutating into repressive instruments. Particularly in the case of political decisions, it is also important to always bear in mind that they inevitably affect the interests of others and can therefore only be justified if these interests have been given due consideration. This requires a conscientious examination of all relevant circumstances (Herrmann & Neißer, p. 84). A pressing challenge is therefore to put the principle of serious accountability into practice, for example through transparency in decision-making processes, precise communication of moral standards, and the establishment of complaint and appeal procedures against questionable leadership actions (Nahavandi, 2015, p. 86; Connelley & Tripodi, 2012, p. 82). The interplay of personal integrity and effective control mechanisms ultimately forms the framework for responsible political leadership. If one of these two pillars is missing – whether due to institutional weakness or individual negligence – the entire edifice of responsible exercise of power stands on shaky ground. Responsible politicians must therefore be prepared to critically question their own scope for action and actively create or strengthen structures that promote rather than hinder ethical behavior.

5. Conclusion

The analysis shows that political leadership cannot be understood as a one-dimensional process, but rather as a complex interplay of individual characteristics, social-psychological mechanisms, and institutional framework conditions. The power of political actors is derived from formal authority, informal influence, and the norms of the system in which they operate (Korte, Florack & Kamps, 2022, p. 45). These dimensions overlap, creating a multi-layered field of possible courses of action ranging from integrative to repressive strategies. From a social psychological perspective, it becomes clear how authoritarianism structures leadership processes, shaping not only the behavior of leaders themselves, but also influencing the reactions of their followers (Zmerli & Feldman, 2022, p. 15). Authoritarian patterns have a stabilizing effect on short-term control, but in the long term they carry the risk of systemic isolation from criticism and an impoverishment of innovative ideas. A key finding is that group mechanisms such as peer pressure or diffusion of responsibility are deeply embedded in political decision-making processes. These mechanisms can help to implement decisions more quickly and coherently (Gast, 2009, p. 222), but at the same time reduce the likelihood of dissenting opinions and critical debate. This creates a tension between efficiency and the deliberative quality of political measures (Fackelmann, 2009, p. 297; Helmold, 2022, p. 43).

The development of communication cultures within political organizations is essential for enabling transparency and feedback. The personal integrity of leaders is closely linked to the legitimacy of their decisions. A lack of self-reflection or commitment to values not only leads to individual mistakes, but also undermines the institutional foundation and has a negative impact on public approval, especially in contexts with weak democratic controls or high resource inequality. This highlights the need for continuous ethical self-examination and external control mechanisms to prevent abuse of power.

References

- Bowman, S. (2023). *Safe to Great: The New Psychology of Leadership*. Figure 1 Publishing.
- Connelley, C., & Tripodi, P. (2012). *Aspects of leadership. Ethics, Law, and Spirituality*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
- Courpasson, D. (2017). Management as a Practice of Power. *The Oxford handbook of management*, pp. 367-385.
- Fackelmann, B. (2009). Wie Führungsverhalten Veränderungsprozesse beeinflusst. *Zeitschrift für Politikberatung*, 2(2), 296–307.
- Fliegau, M. T. (2009). (Wo) ist Leadership lernbar? *Zeitschrift für Politikberatung*, 2(2), 260–268.
- Gast, H. (2009). Was bedeutet "politische Führung"? Eine Übersicht über unterschiedliche Definitionen aus interdisziplinärer Perspektive und ein Vorschlag zur systematischen Analyse des Gegenstandes anhand des Strukturfunctionalismus. *Zeitschrift Für Politikberatung*, 2(2), 211–229.
- Helmold, M. (2022). *Leadership: Agile, virtuelle und globale Führungskonzepte in Zeiten von neuen Megatrends*. Springer Gabler.
- Helms, L. (2014). Politische Führung und Institutionen, oder: Was leistet eine institutionalistische Leadership-Forschung? *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft*, 8(1), 57–78.
- Kevenhörster, P., & Laag, B. (2024). *Strategie und Taktik. Ein Leitfaden für das politische Überleben*. Nomos.
- Koenig, A. (2009). Local leadership: Image und Anforderungsprofile für erfolgreiche Kommunalpolitiker. *Zeitschrift für Politikberatung*, 2(2), 308–317.
- Korte, K., Florack, M., & Kamps, K. (2022). *Handbuch Regierungsforschung* (2nd ed.). Springer.
- Lewkowicz, E.-M., & West-Leuer, B. (2016). *Mit Emotionen zu Authentizität und Führungserfolg*. Springer.
- Maizière, T. d. (2009). Wie Politik Beratung braucht. *Zeitschrift für Politikberatung*, 2(2), 186–192.
- Merton, R. K. (1969). The social nature of leadership. *The American Journal of Nursing*, 69(12), 2614–2618.
- Nahavandi, A. (2015): *The art and science of leadership*. Pearson.
- Pederzini, G. A. (2019). *Considering leadership anew. A handbook on alternative leadership theory*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Riggio, R. E. (2017). Management and Leadership. *The Oxford handbook of management* (pp. 276–292).
- Rufyikiri, G., & Geneva Centre for Security Policy (2020). *Reshaping approaches to sustainable peacebuilding and development in fragile states*. Geneva Centre for Security Policy.
- U.S. Army War College Press, & U.S. Strategic Studies Institute (2014). *The Role of Leadership in Transitional States: The Cases of Lebanon, Israel-Palestine*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
- Zmerli, S., & Feldman, O. (2022). *Politische Psychologie. Handbuch für Studium und Wissenschaft* (2. ed.). Nomos.